

The Other Side by DaineYui

Series: Long Lost Child Series [2]

Category: IT (Movies - Muschietti), Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Action/Adventure, F/M, M/M, Science Fiction

Language: English

Characters: And others to come..., Ben Hanscom, Bill Denbrough, Dustin Henderson, Eddie Kaspbrak, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Hanlon, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Richie Tozier, Stanley Uris, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, More to come

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Summary:

Synopsis:

Mike had always known deep in his gut that the closing of the Gate and the shutting down of Hawkin's Lab didn't mean that the Party was free and clear of all that the Lab had been working on. Sure, the monsters, such as the Mind Flayer and the demogorgons, may have been locked on one side of the Gate while the rest of the Hawkin's population remained safely on the other side, but there were more than one type of monsters. And the ones that trouble him now are the human adult kind.

Richie had been hoping that the troubles were actually over. It had been tough enough surviving one bastard of a clown, his mother's death, and adjusting to one very new, very traditional "healthy" family. He really didn't need more stress, thank you very fucking

much. But no one's asked him for his opinion and all he knows is that as long as Mikey and him are together, at least there's a fighting chance. Right?

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

This is a sequel to Long Lost Child and the first Part does need to be read before this... or else it'll be really confusing!! Thanks for everyone who's been supporting my work!!! Love you all!!! <3

Disclaimer 1: I do not own the Stranger Things or IT characters. The Stranger Things characters were created by the Duffer Brothers and IT characters by Stephen King. I bow to all of them and to the actors that brought these characters to life. Please know that this story is mainly based on Stranger Things Season 1 and 2 as well as the IT 2017 and IT Chapter 2 movie adaptations with some information from Wikipedia and Youtube about the novel.

Disclaimer 2: Just a heads up that there's potentially triggering scenes in the story including but not limited to murder, kidnapping, suicidal ideation, child neglect and abuse, internalized and non-internalized homophobia, and violence. If that's not something you want to have to deal with, I would suggest looking for another story to read that combines this cast! There are tons out there that are wonderful!!

Part II – *The Other Side*

The Sequel to *Long Lost Child*

Chapter 1

Day 1 & 2

Richie is fighting a losing battle. He's trying to stay asleep while his senses are all working against him and trying very hard to wake him up. He feels it in the way that the peace is leaving him, the way his thoughts start to pinpoint things that are off (*it's cold and his head hurts and wherever he's laying is hard. Harder than it should be.*), and the way a growing uneasiness is filling him instead. He hasn't tried to open his eyes yet though because he actually is still really tired. Groggy tired. Like the kind of tired that he'd experienced when he first started taking the sleeping aid and had taken it too late and it hadn't quite worn off by the time the alarm had gone off the next morning. He'd been a complete zombie then. Senses aware but just not able to physically act until Aunt Karen had shaken him awake. Even then, they'd (*she'd*) ended up deciding that he just needed to sleep it off and had called him out of school that day. They'd figured out when he needed to take it so he wasn't so impacted the following morning.

But he hadn't taken the prescribed sleep aid in almost two weeks...

There simply hadn't been as much of a need for it now that school was out and summer vacation was here. His nightmares were starting to come less frequently and when they did come, he could at least sleep in and not have to worry about school.

The little niggling thought stays with him and he starts to fight not against waking up but against staying asleep. He needs to open his eyes. He needs to understand.

He feels his eyelids fluttering and there's light that makes him close his eyes tightly once more. Too bright. He gives it another try and is able to see more than just light. It doesn't make sense though what he sees. It's nothing familiar. Sterile is actually the first word that comes to mind and he's briefly brought back to the time he was hospitalized. It makes him open his eyes a third time more rapidly and they stay open now. He scans the room, taking more in.

He's on a cot, mattress thin and hard, cotton sheet under him. The walls are white and bare, no windows, just one door and it's shut. Mikey is here with him though on a similar cot and he's in a hospital garb, those thin cotton like tunics that barely come up to his

knees. There's pants of the same make and color. Mikey's still asleep from the looks of it, face and mouth slack from lack of tension. There's something... *off* about Mikey though. And his brain is still chugging away like its wading in molasses because when it finally clicks, it seems so painfully obvious that it scares him that it didn't come to him until he had to actually *think* about it.

Mikey's hair has been shaved off. It's all gone.

He's not quite panicking yet because none of it makes any sense. And its reassuring that whatever is happening, at least he's not alone. Mikey is here with him.

It has to be a dream though. It has to be. It's the only way any of this makes any sense. A fucked up dream that he only thinks he's waking up from when he's not.

It's with a trembling hand that he reaches for his own head and finds his own waves of messy brown hair to be gone. Instead, there's just the odd softness of hair shaved close to a buzz cut. *That is not a look we can pull off.* The thought is random but it causes a bark of a laugh to leave him. If only for a moment.

His hand falls back to his side. *This feels strangely real for a dream. And what if it isn't a dream? What if... if, if, if... fucking ifs.* He has a whole list of ifs. If only he could remember why and how they got here and when... that would be more helpful. And where is here anyway? There's a part of him that thinks if the medicine continues to wear off then maybe the memories will come back and explain it all away but there's nothing coming to him. Absolutely nothing.

He tries to think back and initially the only thing he remembers is the Quarry. Playing in the water, enjoying the summer sun, of being surrounded by the Party, of playing chicken and of laughing. Biking Ellie Belle to the cabin and biking home... but that's all. That's all he remembers.

Richie slowly pushes himself up one elbow, hating how dry his mouth is and how it makes his tongue stick to the roof of his mouth. He hates how his muscles feel all weak and how it makes him feel uncoordinated. He's shaky, his center of gravity warning him

that if he doesn't reposition his weight, his elbow will give up and he'll topple over. He adjusts carefully and tries to swallow. He really wants water but there's nothing besides them and the two cots in the room. No medical machines. Nothing. Not a hospital then. Wrong guess...

No to a dream. It's too real. No to a hospital. Too sterile. A lab?

"Mikey..." He manages to utter. "Mikey, wake up man..." His twin makes a slight face, looks like he's about to turn over and away with the way his muscles twitch but he doesn't. He ends up staying where he is and Richie pulls himself into a sitting position. He's shaky still but he manages. "Mikey! I mean it! Wake. Up."

A little grumble of a groan answers him.

"Not good enough Mikey!" Still firmly holding on to the cot's mattress, he reaches over and slaps at the air near his twin. It's only the very tips of his fingers that manage to actually hit flesh. It shows as bright thin trails of red blooming on pale skin. He does it again and finally, fucking finally, Mikey starts to truly stir. He can tell it's a fight but it's happening. Brown eyes open and close several times in rapid succession before finally staying open. There's an unnatural stillness that takes over his twin's body that should be worrisome (*is worrisome*) but Richie knows what it means. He knows that Mikey's brain is probably taking everything in just like he did moments before and is trying to make sense of it all. He hopes Mikey remembers more than he does because if not they're screwed.

...more than they clearly already are.

"Mikey..."

His twin takes a huge inhale in and it sounds like it hurts. It's a harsh noise in the oppressive silence of the room. Mikey slowly turns and gets up, body also trembling from whatever drug they'd been given.

"Richie..." The way his name is said does not give him hope. Instead it fills him with more panic and despair than he'd expected.

...

They're left alone long enough for the two of them to get enough strength back in their limbs that they've mapped the small square box of a room from inch to inch. There's really nothing here besides the cots and the door, firmly locked. They've tried opening it several ways now – simply turning the knob in blind hope that it wasn't locked all the way to running into it in a mad panicky move that only increased the overall sense of claustrophobia.

After more than one severe panic attack between them both that had left Mike's own rib cage aching and the acrid sickening smell of vomit thick in the air, they'd silently agreed to leave the door alone.

It simply wasn't productive.

"Talk to me Mikey cause I can't just stay here in silence... say something... anything." Richie's voice is raw and thick and Mike winces at the panic that he can still here under all the exhaustion. He sags onto one of the cots and looks around again, trying to clear his head *enough* to be able to do what Richie is asking him to do. It takes a couple false starts but then he's off.

"I remember Dr. Winterwell... at home. We were on our bikes... and he had something to give... us? I think... something heavy that he needed help with..."

"I don't remember that Mikey...why the fuck don't I remember any of that? All I remember is the Quarry."

"I don't know." Mike shakes his head. "I don't know why you can't remember. It's pretty fuzzy for me but...I keep seeing his face and thinking it's wrong. He wasn't supposed to be there."

There's a long drawn out pause before Richie breaks the silence again.

"It hasn't been a fucking year yet. You said the big stuff happened every year – more or less. It hasn't been that long yet. This is too soon..."

...

It's hard to keep track of the passing time. There's no changing of the light and no sound outside the enclosed room that they can hear at least. Minutes can feel like hours or days even and Mike knows this so he doesn't even try and guess at how long they've been awake. He just knows that his heart still hurts because of how hard it's beating and he's not sure when the sheer emotional overload is going to conk both of them into a deep sleep out of pure physical exhaustion.

Richie keeps standing up, pacing, and then sitting back down. Sometimes it's a quiet walk around the room. Other times, his twin freaks out and he's hitting and kicking and yelling and cursing himself hoarse. Those latter times are starting to leave their marks. Red on white. The vividness of the red slowly browning as the blood starts to dry. He'd yelled at Richie the first time to knock it off and he'd made a show of inspecting the broken skin, the turned up nail – minor hurts – and so now when Richie goes through the cycle of lashing out against the door, Mike simply watches.

There's no sign of life outside the room that responds to these outbursts though and Richie deflates like a popped balloon just like every previous time. That's when he comes back to settle in a limp curl besides Mike, his head shoving itself against his twin's hip.

It goes on like this. Just on and on and on and on and...

When the door opens, the sound is too loud. Too intrusive. Both of them are up and on their feet and wildly looking at the door.

He knows he should have been expecting it. He'd already assumed Hawkins Lab was involved but still his brain stalls as he sees the face that's being revealed.

...

When the door opens, it briefly causes a flare up of contradicting emotions in Richie. Fear (*in that, soil your pants sort of fear*) and relief. Relief that finally something will start to explain why the hell they're here and that some sort of action can take place.

Because if he has to stay one second more in this white box with only his blood to finger paint the walls with (*and or feces but that's fucking gross dude, and oh shit, where's the bathroom anyway in this joint?*), he's going to fucking lose it.

He startles though when Mikey just starts to yell at the man who's walking in. At first glance, the man just seems polished. Tall, white hair, impeccably groomed and definitely no one that Richie recognizes off the bat. His voice is soft yet commanding. Cultured yet... the longer Richie stares and listens to the back and forth, the more he starts to wish that the door hadn't been opened at all.

He'll take back the white box, thanks.

"You can't be here. I saw you get attacked by the demogorgon. You were dead!"

"I was attacked, yes but I was never dead." The man's voice is quiet.

"How is that even possible? I saw you! We *all* saw you!" Mikey demands and Richie wishes his twin would shut up because there's something about the way the man is looking at them, the way he's talking and moving that gives him the creeps. He doesn't want anything to prolong the interaction and he definitely, *definitely* doesn't want anything to set this man off. There's just something about the calculated stillness – the calmness that just warns him that this man is more than a little dangerous.

"The creature that your friends called a demogorgon, yes? Much like a shark, was in too much of a frenzy due to the smell of blood and so many moving prey to really pay attention as to whether it *killed* everything before moving onto the next..." It's stated like an offhand shrug. Like the detail is minute and boring and Richie can't help but want to take another step back and away. But there's nowhere to go.

"What do you want with us?!" Mikey's voice breaks at the question. "We don't know where *she* is..."

"Oh Michael," The man smiles and motions for them to take a

seat on one cot while he smoothly sits himself down on another. “Please sit.” And Richie does, grabbing his twin and getting him to sit the fuck down right next to him. “I have known where Eleven is for quite some time now. She is right where she should be, growing... learning... getting stronger. I’m quite sure that she’ll find her way back to me,” A pause as he looks the twins over. “...to us, soon enough.”

“...no...” Mikey says horrified. “No. You can’t use us as bait. That won’t work. She’s never coming back to you. Never!” The man simply smiles calmly, unfazed by Mikey’s vehement protest and clearly not seeing a need to argue. Instead, his eyes continue to carefully take them in. It’s like being measured but Richie’s not sure which parts of him exactly are being assessed and he feels the goosebumps erupt all over under the scrutiny.

“Dear, dear boys. We have so much to talk about...”

Yeah, really wishing the door had never opened.

Tbc...

2. Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

Short update but next one will be on Sunday to make up for it!!! Thank you everyone for all of the support!!! You're wonderful!!! <3

Chapter 2

Day 2

“On March 10th, 1970, an experiment took place in the Soviet Union that attracted much attention. Ninel Sergeyevna Kulagina, born on July 30th 1926 and 44 years old at the time, was able to stop the beating of a frog’s heart that had been floating in solution simply with the power of her mind. The heart was measured to beat faster than slower, before finally coming to a complete stop.

Prior to this feat, she had been found to move objects without touching them when she was angered or upset. Her husband was the one who initially brought it to the attention of the authorities, having video taped his wife in action multiple times. Several other experiments and videos of her feats were documented by at least 40 renowned scientists in controlled laboratory settings. Their findings ranged detailing what she could or could not do and reporting that she could even separate broken eggs submerged in water – moving the whites and yolks away from one another – simply by concentrating and using her own energy. She never touched the items and it was recorded that her heartbeat, brain waves, and electromagnetic fields were accelerated and significantly changed.

Of course, several scientists and non-scientists fought to disprove these findings. They spent years loudly vocalizing that sleight of hand techniques such as using disguised threads, metals, mirrors or even magnets could explain exactly what she was doing and how she was manipulating the various objects placed in front of her.

These men and organizations had their own agendas. Whether it be political – hiding the growing interest and funding on psychokinetic work for military purpose that their own countries and governments were suddenly backing - or simply to manage the most banal of human emotions – fear of the unknown. In the end, they all remained the same. They were all fools. None of their cries could erase what was now internationally public knowledge. Extrasensory perceptions or psychokinetic abilities were no longer a thing of myths and fairy tales. They were real and they could be measured, quantified via rigorous scientific measurements.

Once the American government got wind of this woman and of the many studies that the Soviet Union was putting her through and most likely others of similar ilk, well... you can rest assured that a team in the US was put in place to be able to replicate and even further their findings. Imagine what an army made of individuals able to harness the full power of our brain's potential versus the mere ten percent that normal individuals use could accomplish. It could bring an end to the Cold War. An end to all wars. America safe to remain the primary world power forever.

The team started by analyzing all the research that had been made public and those less public. From there, we were able to create a list of identifying factors for those who were naturally able to tap into these abilities. Once identified, they were further categorized. Telekinetics who could move objects solely with their minds, usually when emotionally triggered. Pyrokinetics who could create fire and manipulate fire, a distant cousin of the Telekinetics. And then there were Telepaths – able to hear others' thoughts, glean information from others even from a distance, as well as manipulate other's perceptions of reality. Empaths – able to *feel* and manipulate what others feel. And lastly, the Sensitives. Those who have the potential for any of the ESPs but for a reason or another, the potential remains untapped. They tended to be the offspring of the other categories, were sensitive to the others, and to a certain extent helpful even in verifying that the others were indeed the *real deal* as some would say but beyond that... useless.

And there are so few of real Telekinetics, Pyrokinetics, Telepaths, and Empaths. Most who made claims that they could use

any of these powers were largely charlatans out to make some quick cash. They were easy to disprove and dismiss.

But the real ones... they were harder to find. Much, much harder. It seemed like specific conditions needed to be met for whatever part of the brain controlling these skills to come to life. Life or death situations typically near or during the start of puberty led to the strongest of cases. And well, following the end of World War II, The Cold War, and Vietnam War... even if these individuals were few in numbers, they did at least exist in what most likely was a higher percentage than known before.

We didn't merely want to study them and understand how it is that they were able to do what they could do. We wanted to be able to recreate it.

MK Ultra did just that. Eleven was our first success. The others who came before her pale in what she can do. She isn't just a Telepath. She's a Telekinetic and an Empath as well, able to connect and communicate with beings in worlds beyond our own. She was born from a mundane who's body had simply been put through just the right circumstances at just the right times during her pregnancy. Your mother was as well."

Richie knows that the words have ended being pushed out into the white cube of a room. He knows because his eardrums have stopped vibrating at the sudden lack of noise. It still doesn't feel quiet though. The blood rushing in and out with each beat of his heart keeps it from being completely quiet.

He knows that he's just staring. But he's lacking in words right now. This man is *absolutely* bat shit crazy.

"But we're not like El...Eleven." Mikey's voice cracks at 'correcting' himself and using El's original name. "We're not even..." There's a hitch in his words as it's clear that he's trying to use the right terms. The ones that have suddenly appeared and been made known to them. Richie doesn't even know why his twin is bothering. But again, he's also not quite sure why he's sitting here – frozen and speechless – in a way he's never been before. Not even with *It*. Not even with his mother's lifeless body. Not really... even then, he'd

ended up acting but right now. Right here. There's nothing. He's simply... staring. "...*Sensitives*."

"Yes, you are." The tone is so even, calm, and collected that it could easily be perceived as soothing. The voice isn't though. Richie knows that the man and his collected nature are not soothing in the slightest in the way his heart picks up speed once again and it *hurts*. He rubs at his chest as if it'll help the muscle that's currently being overworked and quite abused.

"..." He can hear his twin's mouth open. Just like he can feel the muscles in the lithe body next to him tensing as if Mikey's gearing up to dispute the great white shark of a man that is simply swimming around them, casually waiting for them to drown. No needless energy needing to be dispensed. The man's half chiding smile that thins his lips revealing white teeth does nothing to change Richie's fear response to him. And it *really* does shit in getting rid of the image of the powerful predator closing in around them.

"Michael, do you really think we'd pick you both up simply on a *hunch*?" There's only the slightest of pauses before the man continues. "We've been watching the two of you for quite some time and it was becoming quite apparent that you were both at the very least, *Sensitives*. And little nudges from our operatives seemed to indicate that you could be more. And now here we are."

"...*operatives*?" The kind wrinkled face of his therapist flashes in his mind and Richie feels the nausea cramp his stomach and bile burn in his throat.

A small smile is the only answer that they receive in this moment.

A/N - All information used to write this chapter came from handy dandy Wikipedia post on this topic. You can find the information here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nina_Kulagina

Tbc...

3. Chapter 3

Summary for the Chapter:

In which the Party gather and start plotting to find Mike and Richie

Chapter 3

Day 3

It's easy enough to get permission to enter the twin's shared room. It's the act of asking that had been hard. It was seeing the emotional impact on Mrs. Wheeler that had hurt. But it had to be done and Lucas is going to do anything and everything to get his friends back regardless of how hard it is. So he'd done the asking because he knew he was ready for whatever it took. He wasn't sure how ready the rest of the shaken Party was. Oh they were right there with him but he knew there'd been relief at him taking charge now that Mike is gone.

Lucas opens the door and takes it all in before stepping inside. Nothing here has overtly changed. It's still Mike and Richie's room like it's always been. Still half messy, half clean and ...He hears a muffled sniffle and the sound of Dustin by his other side fixing his hat but nothing else. The air around him seems heavy with sadness but also determination. He looks at Dustin and then Max before the three wordlessly divide the room into different sections that they can search.

Will had opted out of coming, instead staying with El at the cabin and trying to get her energy and health back so that she could help them search for Mike and Richie again in the way she only could. He also has a feeling that Will is staying with her to ensure that she doesn't do anything rash like leave on her own to go searching blindly for the two of them. She'd tried that first night and Hopper... holy hell had he been scary.

Dustin is going through the desk carefully and minutely while Max is shifting through the book shelf, taking off one item at a time before putting it back in it's rightful place. There might be nothing here to find but they still have to try.

Lucas shakes himself into action and finds himself getting on his hands and knees to search underneath the beds. There are lots of dust bunnies that make him sneeze but not much else until...

...until he realizes that there's a shoebox stuffed way back and in a corner under Mike's bed. He has to literally lie down on the floor and scoot under the bed to grab it. It's not overly heavy and he's able to pull it to himself easily enough. Lucas takes a steady breath, trying to ready himself for disappointment, before opening it once he's out from under there.

He calls out to the other two when opening it reveals newspaper clippings and handwritten notes about a Dr. Evans and a Dr. Winterwell.

“Guys... I may have found something...”

“What is it?” Max asks, getting to his side first. Dustin isn't far behind.

“I'm not ... entirely... sure.” The hesitation in his words has more to do with the fact that he's reading quickly over the headlines than actual doubt of what the contents of the box are all about. “I think Mike was researching the studies on MK Ultra. Did you know he was doing this...?” He can't help but ask Dustin even though he already knows the answer.

“No.” Dustin shakes his head and reaches for the box to look at some of the other documents. “He must have been doing this for awhile...look at how much stuff there is in here.”

“And not just about the study but...who are these people?” Max asks quietly, eyes scanning through the handwritten notes, little frown on her face as she tries to decipher the some times coded messages. “It looks like he tried to do a background check on them. He said he didn't think that they were involved with Hawkins Lab or

the study. Though he sounds awfully suspicious about Ms. Sandy.”

“Does he?” Lucas mutters. “Not entirely surprising...” He shakes his head. “Richie and Mike did get pulled out of classes a couple times that one week back in like what...late April, early May or something? Maybe they were seeing this Dr. Evans and Dr. ...”

“Winterwell.” Max finishes for him.

“But why wouldn’t he say anything to us about it?” Dustin asks, sounding lost while still going through the articles one by one.

“...maybe because he was afraid of how we’d react...” Max offers quietly when Lucas stays silent on the topic. He has his theories but he doesn’t want to say them out loud. It would sound too much like placing blame and that’s the last thing the Party needs right now.

“What do you mean?” Dustin asks sharply.

“I mean...” Max starts hesitantly but then pushes herself to finish. “...maybe he thought we’d treat Richie and him differently or have more reason to not let Richie know about any of it.”

“That doesn’t make any sense...” Dustin starts but Max shakes her head and simply gives Dustin another piece of loose leaf paper. This one is written almost all in Morse code with only a handful of words strewn about here and there. “...shit.” Dustin grabs the sheet from her and starts to translate. He’s the fastest one after Will having had his interest piqued the last time they’d been put in a position to use it which had led him to actually memorizing the damned code. The two of them watch him quietly, waiting for him to finish. He ends up grabbing a nearby pen to make some notes here and there. It takes a couple of minutes before he finally stops and just stares at them.

“Are there more like this?” He asks, hands grabbing the box and digging through the contents.

“Why? What does it say? Dustin!?” Dustin’s shaking his head impatiently before finding more, all of them woven in between other papers as if Mike had been determined to have them lost in the other

content. Dustin's shuffling through them before he makes a little *ah* noise and starts to put them in some sort of order.

“What are you doing?”

“Guys, Mike was writing entries.” Dustin says hushed, eyes scanning some of the code and writing notes here and there while trying to explain. “Some of these date from before the Mage came back. His suspicions... the fact that...” The words stop short and Dustin gets up. “We need to take these somewhere else.” He whispers and simply writes on the back of one: The house is bugged. Not safe.

Max’s eyes widen and she bites her lip before simply getting up and dusting herself off.

“Let’s go then...”

...

They meet back up at the cabin. The fact that there’s the Morse Code spelled out on a poster makes it easier for them to split the handful of sheets amongst all of them and start translating each entry. Some of them are easier than others. They’re short and brusque – like the one about Hopper doing a perimeter sweep of the Wheeler house and Mike detailing where every device was located in the house. Some are longer and are more about his frustrations in not finding more about the different people who are or were part of the original MK Ultra studies.

Mostly though, they seem to be a listing of facts and the start to a timeline. Or timelines. One is El’s timeline that starts with Terry Ives joining the study, leaving the study, and the lawsuit that followed her supposed miscarriage all the way to El being found in the woods. There are others about missing children around that same time and questions about the children.

The entire gang isn’t sure how all of those articles and entries fit in with everything else. It doesn’t seem like Mike was sure about it either but had still thought it relevant enough to hold onto and to comment on. Only one of the articles on missing children makes El gasp in surprise as it reveals her sister. Kali. Eight. She looks so very

young in that picture...

Her gasp makes Will look at her briefly and no one questions her as she takes the cut out article outside of the pile to keep. They know it will be a story that she'll share with them at a later time. Hopefully, once Mike and Richie is back with them. But for now, they have to focus.

The last timeline is for a Maggie Manning. That timeline is confusing and it takes a bit to puzzle out because there are different iterations of it as if Mike had been trying to work it out and was missing chunks of data he needed. They were also the ones hardest to decipher simply because it was clear that he'd written and erased all the versions multiple times, so much so that some of the entries were on paper that had been thinned out and seemed more fragile than the rest.

However, it becomes clear that in May he'd gotten a big piece of that particular timeline confirmed. The last entry on it listed Richie and Mike's name as being her sons, how they'd been separated, where and when Maggie had moved with a couple of different last names written with question marks near each, and a bullet point about needing to research a Went Tozier. There was also a question hurriedly written: Was she still part of the study when pregnant?

Nothing else. No answers. No articles or any notes on Went Tozier.

“How does this help us?” Max breaks the silence finally. “So Mike had a theory about their mom and Hawkins Lab.... What do we do with that?” At first her questions are greeted with blank stares. But Dustin doesn’t disappoint her as he pokes himself in the middle of the forehead.

“...It confirms what we’ve all been thinking...”

“That...what?” Lucas asks, trying to follow his friend’s logic.

“That Hawkin’s lab is involved in their disappearance somehow. Mike was apparently just as suspicious about *all* of it as I was, he was just looking at it from a different angle.”

“Go on.” Will mutters quietly.

“Instead of being suspicious of Richie, he was suspicious of all of the adults around the case. He jotted down the social workers managing Richie’s case while he was in Derry, the therapists, and the psychiatrist... he even listed the medications that they were prescribed and researched them to ensure that they were truly for sleep and anxiety and...” He looks back down at the one he’d just finished uncoding. “...ADHD.” (*That explained some things*).

“Yeah, he was suspicious but he didn’t find anything off. He writes himself that he couldn’t find any connection between Hawkins Lab and well... anyone new that was suddenly involved with them.”

“True,” Dustin mutters, absently chewing on the eraser of his pencil. “But that doesn’t mean that they weren’t... just that he couldn’t find any evidence of it.”

“Maybe Nancy would know if Richie and Mike continued to meet with any of these people...” Lucas offers and El shakes her head.

“No.” She starts quietly. “I know... they did. Mike and Richie were still meeting with Dr. Winterwell and Dr. Evans. At first it was twice a week but because they were doing better...” She trails off and Will isn’t surprised that Mike had told her about these meetings and not the rest of them. It still hurts though.

“He told you?!” Dustin asks. It doesn’t sound like he’s asking because of hurt. More like the good scientist that he is who wants to know more information. “Did he say anything about what they were meeting about?”

“No.” She shakes her head, eyes filling with tears that she wipes away angrily. “Just that the meetings were the reason why he couldn’t get away to see me as much. It became easier when Richie knew and when the meetings started to happen less frequently but... he never really talked about them beyond that.” Will takes her hand in his and squeezes it. The group stays quiet for a bit, digesting all the information.

Max finds herself once again moving towards breaking the silence. She needs to be active. She needs to be doing *something*.

“So we start with them...” She offers, knowing that if the suggestion isn’t found to be good that the rest of the Party will voice the reasons why they shouldn’t follow that plan of action. “Search out where their office is located, their home addresses and go from there. And maybe search for this... Went Tozier?”

“And not tell Hopper?” Dustin asks. All of them exchange glances before they each shake their head. They know that if they share this, all that they’re going to be told is to leave the investigation in his hands and to simply wait.

And they can’t do that.

Tbc...

A/N - Thank you for all the love, support, and feedback as this story is getting written! It's meant the world to me!!! I wanted to let you all know that I'm working on posting 1-2 updates in the next couple of days and then I'll most likely be MIA for a week and a half as I'll be traveling (I'm debating whether I'll take my laptop or not, most likely will but I'm not sure how much time I'll have to write or even have access to the internet). Thanks for the understanding!!!

4. Chapter 4

Summary for the Chapter:

The Party continues their investigation and it takes a dark turn so warning ahead regarding the darkness!!!

Chapter 4

Days 3 & 4

The easiest part had been tracking down Dr. Winterwell and Dr. Evan's office address. Unfortunately, the office is too far for them to simply bike there. So then it became a debate to find a ride there without it leading to 'a question and answer time' that would bring the adults meddling into their search. Dustin had argued a pretty good case as to why Steve should be brought into the folds of their plan. Lucas had argued back as to why no. El hadn't cared and simply wanted to go *already* but then that was all shot to hell when Hopper arrived home. The furious outburst that the Party expected at having the man finding them holed up in the cabin never came. (*Thank goodness for Dustin's foresight as he'd already packed up the contents of the shoebox, hiding it under a wooden panel in El's bedroom floor*).

The Chief simply looked sad and incredibly tired as he looked at them all. Then even that expression was cleared away as he swallowed hard.

"It's getting late guys. I'm taking you all home." And the man does, even taking El along for the ride albeit in a costume made up of the man's baggiest clothes and sunglasses. Clearly, he doesn't trust her to not try and run off again.

Before he lets even one of them go off though, he gives them each a hard look and asks again to make sure that they're not trying to do anything stupid. Like solve this one on their own. He even makes them promise to keep him in the loop if they do come across something or remember something. Again, *clearly*, Hopper doesn't

trust them to leave it alone. And he *knows* what promises mean to the group.

Sadly, he doesn't know that promises mean little to them when they're ones forcibly made to people outside of the Party.

So yeah, the easy part is tracking the office down. Dustin continues to do some research by sneaking back out to the Library and also by reviewing the Yellow Book's content inside and out. By the next morning, he has other addresses and phone numbers written down including the doctors' personal homes and Ms. Sandy's... He's all ready to share with the others (*couldn't help but already have communicated some of this to Will via their supercomm last night because Lucas, the a-hole, hadn't left his on*) that he'd even made some calls while his mom had been busy feeding their cat.

Dr. Winterwell and Dr. Evans aren't in today. They hadn't been in the office for the past couple of days and no, the secretary had muttered sounding stressed and cross, she didn't know when they would be back. He'd given her the number to the Hawkin's Police Office when asked to provide a return number before thanking her.

Mike and Richie missing AND their doctors. Coincidence? Hell no.

The office *is* far away though and so the Party is back to bickering about Steve and whether he's *cool* enough not to rat them out Hopper. And well, Nancy. Cause Nancy would definitely rat them out. She's too close to this not to.

"Well we can't take the bus there!" Dustin hisses. "It'll take too long. As it is we're wasting time people!"

"How about we hotwire a car? I can drive it." Max jumps in. "You all know I can."

"You nearly killed us in the process." Dustin mutters sourly.

"Because you were being annoying. All of you. I needed to concentrate."

"Wait. Hold up. You know how to hotwire a car?" Lucas

demands, looking at Max as if she's suddenly changed on him.

"Well..." She pulls at one of the longer strands of hair that's hanging off her shoulders irritably. "No." She admits, making a face. "But I know where my mom keeps the keys to her car..."

...

Nancy can't think. She barely feels like she can breathe. The only reason she's at home and not out there doing *something... anything*, is because her mother had entrusted her with Holly's care. And if Nancy isn't dealing well with the disappearance of both Mike and Richie, Holly is dealing with it even worse. Her little sister keeps vacillating between shocked confusion that has her ghosting behind their mother, little hand gripping hard wherever she can and asking where her brothers are and why aren't they home to all out temper tantrums, demanding that Richie and Mike come home and that the adults find them *now*.

The screams and tears typically leave the youngest Wheeler child exhausted and everyone in their wake feeling like the nightmare is never ending.

Nancy knows her parents are talking to the police once again, answering questions about God knows what since none of them know anything. So she stays here, staring blankly ahead as Holly sucks her thumb, currently in ghost mode. It's so silent between them that the ticking of the clock in the other room sounds deafeningly loud.

Her eyes feel dry. Her throat feels thick. Her stomach is cramped and her heart has yet to slow down. She feels sick.

She just wants them to come home.

A knock at the door has her jumping and Holly releases a quiet whimper. Together they make their way over and Nancy has to blink at the sight that is revealed behind the door. Jonathan and Steve are standing together awkwardly; Steve empty handed and Jonathan with a pizza box held out in front of him. It's clear that they didn't plan on coming at the same time and they're not quite sure how to manage the situation. If it had been any other day, before the

nightmare that hasn't ended started, Nancy would have been amused at imagining the socially painful dance they must have gone through, each telling the other that it was okay, that the other could come back later. But right now, she simply blinks at them.

What do they want?

She'd already told Jonathan (*she thinks she remembers talking to him*) that she didn't want company. She couldn't handle the company.

And fuck... how had Jonathan survived when Will had been taken? How had he gone to school? How had he functioned? How had he managed not to tell her to fuck off when she'd gone up to him and offered him the most trite, the most stupid, and just *not* in the slightest comforting words of *don't worry, he's a smart kid. He'll be fine*. She knows that if anyone tried to tell her similar bull shit that she'd lose it on them. She doesn't care about best intentions. She just...is scared and she hates. She truly and utterly hates whoever has Mike and Richie right now.

She wants to hurt them. Wants them to feel exactly what she's feeling right here, right now.

So no. She can't think beyond the raw emotions that are raging within her. And she can't speak. She barely can breath and she's worried if she opens her mouth, she'll just start to scream. Nancy can only stare at the two standing in front of her, taking in how their awkward postures change to one of utter concern.

It's like nails scratching at a chalkboard's surface.

Holly's small hand twists the fabric of her sweater causing Nancy to glance down at her briefly.

"Hiya Holly." Jonathan starts quietly. "Hey Nancy. I figured you guys could use some food. We can go after that if you're still not feeling up for company."

Her previously dry eyes start to prickle and hurt and it's not a fair fight as she tries to blink the sudden moisture away.

“Pizza?” Holly’s small voice doesn’t help. “What kind?” It’s barely above a whisper and seems as fragile as a butterfly’s wing.

“The best kind.” Jonathan answers, kneeling down to her height because of course he would. Jonathan is amazing and kind and knows how to be with kids. Why had she said no to him coming over again?

“What does that even mean?” Steve mutters, tone teasing. He also knows Holly’s favorite pizza toppings and starts to guess wild and outlandish toppings just to hear the little girl’s disgusted exclamations. The little hand that hadn’t released its hold on Nancy’s sweater since their mother had left hours ago finally loosens and Steve suddenly has an armful of a wriggling four year old girl and one pizza box, masterfully stolen from Jonathan with his other hand. Her ex is making his way confidently to the kitchen without a look back leaving Nancy and her boyfriend alone, still by the open door.

Jonathan stands up slowly, quirking an eyebrow up at Nancy in silent question if this is okay, finally looking straight at her. Whatever he sees on her face makes him move towards her until she’s buffered in his arms and crying quietly in his chest.

...

The drive is stressful, marked by shouts and curses when Max’s turns are wider and more haphazard than they should be. And that’s only inside the car. Outside of the car, other drivers have honked loudly at them and they’ve been provided with several rather *rude* hand gestures by drivers who had managed to pass them. One had even gone so far as to stick his head outside his car window to yell at them to get off the road!

But they make it to their destination in one piece without getting pulled over and Max is damn proud of that feat. She just needs a minute to take a breath and chill for a bit before stepping outside of the car.

They’d decided against going to the main office since Dustin had already determined that Dr. Winterwell and Dr. Evans were out of the office. Instead after flipping the coin, they’d chosen to head

straight for Dr. Winterwell's home.

Max hears as Dustin leaves the car quickly, slamming the car door behind him with a muttered *Thank God* and *Never again* that's too loud to be subtle. She doesn't care.

Part of her agrees with him even. Another part of her thinks that this would have been wicked cool if it wasn't for the fact that she was breaking the law to try and find her missing friends.

"Coming?" Lucas asks, shaky hand coming over to squeeze her shoulder.

"Yeah, coming." She says faintly, trying to throw him one of her cocky, devil may care grins.

They don't get a chance to leave the car though before Will and Dustin come back. They had heard their voices, dimly but neither had been paying attention. So it's a bit of a surprise to see them come back inside the car, closing the doors behind them without much of an explanation.

"What's going on?" Max twists around in her seat to stare at them. "Is this not the house?"

Dustin shakes his head, digging at the neatly folded map and trying to shake it open.

"It is." Will mutters. "It's just, Dr. Winterwell's neighbor saw us and told us we'd missed the family. She said she'd seen them leave a couple of days ago in a van and was sure that they must have left on their yearly family vacation early. They have a summer home in the woods not too far from here."

"She told you all that?" Lucas is surprised and slightly perturbed. He hopes none of his damned neighbors paid that close attention to what his family did. And he also hopes that they wouldn't share it with anyone who just happened to stop by. Still this is a damn lucky break for their own selfish reasons. Will gives a slight shrug, adjusting the way his seatbelt lays against his shoulder and chest.

“Dustin charmed her. And she seemed lonely...”

“She’s what my mom will be like when I’m off to college.” Dustin pipes up, not unkindly. “Alone with the company of a cat or two. Anyways, I know where to go...”

...

The man, Dr. Brenner, had left them yesterday alone in the white box of a room to simmer in their thoughts and knowledge that they weren’t getting out of this mess for a long time to come. Neither had said a word and Richie was sure that neither had been able to sleep.

The start to the new day is marked with Dr. Brenner coming to get them along with another staff member. The aide is unremarkable beyond the look of utter devotion to the doctor. The man said nothing, did nothing without first being told to do so. An android would have had more free will.

The twins are told to come and they get up wordlessly to follow.

“I thought I would show you something. Perhaps a little incentive for us to work...collaboratively.”

The goosebumps that erupt on his skin can’t be rubbed away and Richie walks closer to Mikey as they make their way through what seems like endless hallways. He tries to keep track of each twist and turn, to spot something that may help them in the long run but all that he gets for his effort is a tension headache. He knows with the way the tension is practically causing Mikey to vibrate next to him that his twin must be doing the same and coming to similar conclusions. This place is a fucking maze.

After what seems like miles upon miles of a trek in nondescript hallways, they’re finally ushered into a small room that has a television screen settled on a table. It’s turned on and the picture quality isn’t the best. It’s grainy with white lines quickly coming down through the image every so often.

Richie doesn't know how this is going to be an incentive exactly but he's not entirely sure that he wants to understand. Still, he can't look away and he sits when he's told to. Mikey does the same in a more stiff manner besides him.

"It's on the right channel?" Dr. Brenner asks and the aide nods.

"The volume is on as well, sir."

"Very well. Thank you Brian."

Richie leans in to get a better look. At first glance, he'd thought that there was nothing really to see even if the television had been on. But he'd been wrong. There are people that are barely visible in the dim lighting of what appears to be a cabin. They're eerily still though and...

Mikey takes in a sharp hiss of a breath beside him as noise suddenly spills from the television. It's all loud echoing knocks and Richie stiffens at the sound of Dusty's voice calling out politely yet slightly muffled, "Hello? Hello? Dr. Winterwell? Is anybody home?" The still figures don't react and Richie finds himself squinting at the screen. What the fuck is all of this? Why is Dusty there? What is he doing? He wants to yell at Dusty to get away. To just turn around and *run* and can't help gripping the table's metal surface hard as a fresh new wave of adrenaline surges through him.

The door that is out of the camera's line of vision is suddenly opened and allows daylight to cast the whole macabre scene into light.

Mikey and Richie are left staring at the screen in mindless horror at what they see. There's nothing left to say. And the minute slump in Mikey's shoulder tells Richie that whatever fight, whatever hope Mikey had been holding onto simply leaves him in stunned defeat and grief.

...

On the other side of the television screen, miles from the lab

and actually in the wooded cabin, with no knowledge that they're being filmed, the Party stay paralyzed where they are, the door swinging shut behind them. The change in lighting doesn't erase the scene that's in front of them. The way the two children and woman are tied to a chair, mouths taped shut, and blood long dried around where the bullet had hit them right in the forehead and where it had sprayed in the back. The way the man in a suit is crumpled to the ground, gun in hand, and also very dead.

Dustin is the first to gag, spin around and run out because he's already put it altogether and these people *are* dead. They've been executed and oh fuck this is bad, bad, bad! This is worse than bad.

Lucas can't move. He knows that if he does, it'll somehow make the macabre scene in front of him real and he can't have this be real. Because this is much worse than anything else the Party has encountered and he's not sure that he's ready for this level of danger. There's hopelessness and despair that's rising inside of him along with the nausea that the buzzing of flies (*it's so loud now, why is it so loud?*) around the bodies is causing. If this is at all tied to Mike and Richie...Fuck it was good that they'd talked El not to come with them and instead asked her to continue searching for Mike and Richie via the Void. Or was it? What if the killer was still here?

The trembling that takes over stops him from finishing the thought and Max is suddenly there gripping his hand in a hold that is so tight that it hurts as much as it is grounding.

Will is the one who starts to move around the cabin. He looks like he's moving without really taking anything in but that's far from the truth. He's sidestepping the bodies, silent tears running down his face, as he looks for any indication that Mike and Richie may have been here... or worse... are still here. He stumbles upon it and chokes hard but it can't be changed. There's the leather chord and he knows that if he gets on his hands and knees he'll probably find all the white and black lettered beads spelling out his friend's name. It's not a conscious decision as he falls and starts to desperately gather them one by one, splinters breaking through skin in tiny pricks that his mind ignores.

“...no, no... no...”

"Will, we have to get out of here man. Will!" Lucas is grabbing at him and pulling him up.

"They were here, Lucas! They were here!"

"Will, there's no time!" And the reason there's no time is because there's a car pulling up the driveway and, and, and... Will lets himself be pulled up, hands gripping tightly at the pieces of the broken bracelet he had managed to gather. They're trying to get out a different way, Dustin back with them, face pale and panicked but the only other way out is a broken window and...

It's Hopper's silhouette that fills the doorway and Dustin starts to cry in relief.

"Jesus kids..." The man grousing and he's suddenly encircled by the Party members. His priority shifts from continuing the investigation to getting the kids out of the cabin and into his car.

He has no idea how much damage to the crime scene they've managed in the time that they've been here. He has no fucking idea how they managed to piece it together in the first place and beat him here... too fucking smart for their own good.

But it's proof again that he can't keep them out of this and yet he wants to, because it's too fucking dangerous and he's not entirely sure who or what they're dealing with.

This isn't one of the days that he's going to be coming home to El with good news again and his heart bleeds because of it.

Tbc...

A/N - Hello everyone, I'm going to do my best to update one last time before I fly and am out of the country. If I am able to do so, it'll either be Wednesday night or Thursday morning AND for all of you who have been patiently waiting, the next chapter will be from the Loser's perspective!!!! LOVE YOU ALL!!! Thanks for continuing to be on this wild ride with me. <3

5. Chapter 5

Summary for the Chapter:

In which the Losers get involved...

Chapter 5

Day 5, 6, 7, 8, & 9

Bill is distracted as he uncurls the newspaper for his father, tilting his head and half nodding to his mother's question of whether he wants mayo on his sandwich as she puts the finishing touches on his lunch that he's planning on taking with him when he meets up with the rest of the Losers. It's still a recent change to have her invested in his life and helping out like this again. He's pretty sure he knows why but thinking about the why just makes him feel like shit so he typically just moves on with his day, brushing the thoughts aside as quickly as they come to him.

His father hasn't quite come down yet but he knows he will and he straightens the newspaper out further on the placemat facing his father's spot at the table. His eyes scan the titles and the gray-scale photographs headlining the front page because it's there but he's not actually reading or taking any of the information in. There's never anything there that's caught his attention before and there's no funny page since it isn't the weekend yet. Bill's actually already turned away and has the fridge open when it hits him. His hand still closes around the milk carton, the pearls of condensation making it cold and slippery and he pulls the container out of the fridge door in one sweeping motion as his brain starts to explode. It can't be...

His body is turning back to the table, back to the newspaper and as he goes to look more closely to prove that his brain is ridiculous and wrong and overly tired, he can't help but take a deep breath in. The carton of milk slips from his hands because it is...He feels the milk come shooting out and slap against his jeans and he hears his mother's distraught voice but all of that seems far away and

distant. Bill grabs the newspaper and turns away from the kitchen hurriedly.

“Bill!” He hears her calling to him but doesn’t respond.

“Bill?” His father is standing at the bottom of the steps and puts a hand out to stop him from getting to the front door. “Don’t you hear your mother calling you?” He gives the man an impatient shake of the head.

“S-s-sorry, I have to go,” He mumbles before slipping past. And he does. This can’t fucking wait. He has to get this to the other Losers and... and...

Silver is rustier than ever but still in working condition and it only takes him a second to hop on and start pedaling furiously to Stanley’s house. If there are any of the Losers that will read the newspaper it’s Stanley and if he sees what Bill’s seeing well... He wants to be there. He wants to have Stanley confirm that he isn’t going crazy and that it *is* true. And fuck, if it is... if it really is, then they need to call the others and come up with a game plan because there’s no way in hell that they’re letting Richie remain missing.

He jumps off his bike while it’s still rolling and doesn’t look back even when he hears it fall hard to the ground, the wheel that’s in the air spinning erratically. He’s out of breath but it doesn’t seem to matter as he starts to take Stanley’s front porch steps two at a time. He’s pushing hard on the ringer and hoping that it’s Stanley that opens the door and not his parents.

Fuck, fuck, fuck...

He’d known it deep in his gut that something was *wrong*. It wasn’t like Richie not to contact them. Not to let them know obnoxiously and loudly that he was alive, motherfuckers and to nag at them about whether they’d missed him or not. But the whole situation had been a fucking mess from start to wherever they were now and it had taken all of them awhile to even be able to process that their bigger than life pain in the butt had tried to kill himself and that they’d been this close to losing him. This close...

He still wakes up at times with the image of Richie's blood all over Eddie and Eddie screaming at them shrilly to call 911, for once not fearing about the AIDS epidemic and getting sick from whatever new blood born pathogen he'd just learned about that week. Eddie had been relentless in trying to staunch the blood flow until the professionals had taken over. Richie had disappeared into the hospital and then completely out of Derry and no one, not one fucking person could be bothered to tell any of them where he'd been taken.

They'd tried *everything* to get even a morsel of information. With Ben and Stanley taking turns imitating adult voices – whether it be another "doctor" on staff, a DCF worker, or a "family member" – they'd always ended up hitting some sort of wall when they were finally caught in their own lie. Even getting their parents involved hadn't helped them get any answers. The hospital staff kept a wall of stony silence under the guise of doctor-patient confidentiality and oh so sorry, if you're not related to him in anyway, then there's really nothing we can do...

And how to explain to those stuffy assed shirts about how the Losers were related on a much deeper level than family and biology? They were so much closer than family, they understood each other... they would kill for each other...

Even DCF had maintained the silence. Albeit they'd been a bit more apologetic, especially to Bill's family as they at least acknowledged how they'd been involved in Richie's care right after all hell had broken loose. But all they could say following the apology was that Richie had been placed with family and that it would be up to Richie to contact them. They could not share anything else.

The Losers had tried waiting, some more patiently than others, but all in all it had been hard to swallow. The fucking hospital hadn't even been willing to confirm that Richie had been alive... at least DCF had... Anyway, they'd been stuck in the waiting, hoping that a call would come and they'd hear their friend's loud but cheerful voice, animated in a way that only Richie could be and ready for this colorful but vivid explanation of what had happened following the trip to the hospital.

But no call ever came.

Stanley had been the one to voice what everyone else had been stewing internally with – that maybe Richie was angry at them. Angry for saving him. And that he wouldn't ever be calling them. The words had been hesitantly offered and the way Eddie had blown up at hearing them still made Bill wince. Eddie had left, like the little thundercloud that he was, and it had taken them months to get him to come hang out with them again. Still, the words remained between all of them. Heavy and awkward and untouchable... The entire topic of Richie had become taboo.

Just like Beverly slowly slipping away from them.

Bill swallows hard, throat tight. He can't go there right now. He can't think about it all because... he has to stay focused. He has to stay in the here and now and show Stanley the newspaper article. He'd never believed that Richie wasn't contacting them out of anger. He'd always felt like something more had to be at play. Now he has proof...

The door swings open and Stanley's pale face is revealed. He's frowning slightly, more out of confusion than irritation. "Bill?"

"I f-f-found him..." Bill cuts his friend off before he can say anything else and pushes the newspaper up. He sees his friend's eyes widen and then the newspaper gets yanked out of his hands roughly.

"No way... no fucking way..."

"Yeah, yeah...We, we need to t-t-tell the others."

...

When the phone rings, Karen jumps for it. Just like she has for every day since Mike and Richie's disappearance. Her heart goes to her throat and hopes war with fears as she strains to hear over the rush of blood and thundering heartbeat. She can't help the thoughts of *have they been found?* Or *are they alive?* Or *Please, please don't let them be dead.*

The voice on the other end isn't Hopper's. It sounds young

and hesitant. It's not a reporter and for that she is suddenly very grateful. But she is confused.

“Hello? Who is this?”

“H-h-hello. M-m-my name is B-b-bill. I...” There’s some shuffling and the sound of a deep gulp of breath being taken in. “I’m Richie’s friend. F-from Derry.”

...

Bill hangs up the phone and looks at his friends who all have mirroring expressions of worry on their faces. It’s clear to him that they want an update even though they’ve heard his side of the conversation already. And they should know just from that – that there is *no* good news. He chews the inside of his cheek and feels his shoulders droop before shaking his head wordlessly.

“Fuck...” The curse is spoken softly at first. “What the fuck is *wrong* with all of you?! Why tell us you’ve found him when he’s just...*fucking missing!*” The chair that Eddie had been perched on the very edge screeches as he pushes himself off of it. “FUCK!” He yells at the top of his lungs. He’s a flurry of violent movement and the slamming of the door is just as loud as his yell. Eddie is gone and the rest of the Losers are left staring at each other.

“Should one us go after him?” Mike asks finally, tone of voice soft and gentle. And heartbreakingly sad.

“What would that do?” Stanley sighs, arms crossing tightly in front of him. “He’ll just bite our heads off. Better let him blow off some steam first...”

“I’m s-s-sorry.” Billy starts and all eyes are back on him. Stanley looks offended by the apology, pale face frowning at him. Mike just seems sad and tired and slightly confused while Ben is shaking his head.

“What the fuck for?” Stanley mutters. “*You* didn’t kidnap Richie. And I’m glad you told us. We at least know where he *was* and maybe can do *something* now.” There’s a pause though that feels

heavy and ominous before Stanley sighs a little brokenly. “Though I’m not sure what the hell we can do...”

“What did Mrs. Wheeler say Bill?” Mike prods gently.

“Just that...its’ an a-a-active investigation and that they h-haven’t h-heard anything but they’re still hopef-f-ful.” He relays dutifully, glossing over the fact that Mrs. Wheeler hadn’t sounded hopeful. She’d sounded tired and broken and *scared*. And so, so, so sad to learn that the Losers had been searching for Richie ever since his hospital stay. “She...” His throat spasms and he has to stop and close his eyes for a minute. In his mind, he repeats *He thrusts his fists against the posts, and still he insists he sees the ghosts*. When the muscles loosen, he tries again. “She p-p-promised to keep us updated.”

“Are their leads?” Ben asks. Bill simply shrugs. He hadn’t actually gotten many details.

“What are you thinking?” Mike is looking at Ben.

“Well...” Ben clears his throat. “We all know how well adults investigate kidnappings in small towns.”

“Derry’s different man.” Mike mutters. “It was cursed by that fucking...” He makes a motion with his hands and doesn’t continue with the descriptors. He doesn’t actually have to. It hasn’t been so long that the memory is dead and buried away for any of them. If anything, Richie’s confirmed kidnapping has returned *It* to the forefront of Bill’s mind like nothing else could have. “Not everyplace is like that and *It*’s dead. We killed him.”

“We don’t know that...” Ben counters. “We know *It* disappeared but to be honest until 27 years pass, I’m not holding my breath.” Well that’s foreboding. Bill sees out of the corner of his eye that Stanley has gone pale white and is holding onto himself in a tight grip, as if he doesn’t dare let go and touch the scars that still stand out prominently on his cheeks. “We don’t even know what *It* was.”

“But you think there may be more like *It*...” The question is too horrendous to contemplate and Mike looks sick at the mere

thought. Bill has to admit that he finds his own stomach doing it's best to upchuck what's in it because...no. *Just no.* But at the same time, now that the possibility is out there, he knows he can't just let it go. He can't just ignore it. Because if there are other *Its*, that means their may be other Georgies, other missing children, and families left to ruins by their unexplained disappearances. And that cannot be allowed to continue. And even more so if Richie's one of them. After all, he'd promised Richie. He'd fucking promised him that he wouldn't let that missing poster child of him in Neibolt house become true.

Ben is shrugging his shoulders, looking anxious. "Dude, I don't want it to be true but, I'm just saying. We don't know shit."

"B-b-ut you th-think we could do b-b-b-better than adults...?" He prompts Ben because one thing he's learned about the *new kid* as Bev had so fondly dubbed him, Ben is smart and always has more information from the wide variety of books he's read than anybody else he's met. He also thinks Ben is right. They could do better than the adults. They have done better. Not that anyone in Derry knows anything about *that*.

"Well yeah, we've done it before." Ben confirms, his words strikingly close to Bill's own thoughts. "I could go to the library, see all there is to learn about Hawkins. Maybe there's a pattern to be found." Bill is nodding at that while thinking about other details. He doesn't just want to do research – although he gets that it's important and they're going to need it. He's just jumping ahead and thinking about how the hell they're all going to get to Hawkins once the research is done. He glances at Mike and isn't startled to find that those large brown eyes are watching him carefully.

"I t-think we can do better t-too. Richie needs us." His voice takes on a determined edge. "Ben, go to the library, see what you can find. Mike, you have that special permit right?"

"To drive on the farm... yes..." The answer is slow. "I can't take the truck from the farm, Bill. My grandfather would kill me." Bill nods at that, discarding that idea with a slight shake of his head. It had been farfetched anyway but he hadn't wanted to discount it without at least asking. The bus it'll have to be.

The plan that's formulating in his head starts to take shape. It shows because as Bill continues to talk, his voice becomes more confident and his stuttering disappears. It's happened before on a handful of occasions. Only Richie's been bold enough to point out the observation though and so it goes unsaid this time around.

They're about to split up with each of them having different roles – Mike to get gear from the farm, Stanley and Bill to get food and money for the bus tickets, and Ben to the library – when the door bell rings. The sound doesn't do shit in changing the mood that has wrapped itself around the teens. If anything, especially when Eddie's tearstained face is revealed behind the door, it just strengthens the group's resolve. Bill welcomes Eddie back in, wordlessly shaking his head as the shorter boy starts to apologize.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry...I just..." He's rubbing angrily at his damp cheeks leaving them red yet dry. "I need Richie back."

"I know." Bill says vehemently, catching Stanley's eye over Eddie's head. "We're going to bring him back. I promise Eddie, we'll bring him *home*."

...

It's a couple of days later that the Losers (*sans Beverly and Richie, obviously*) meet up at the bus station. Stanley is methodically counting their money before going to the ticket counter and ordering the right ones. The guy barely gives them a glance; monotone voice confirming that it's a round trip and not a one way. There's no questioning of where they're going and why and what's with the lack of adult supervision and Bill breathes just a bit easier because of it.

He and Stanley had come up with a story to tell all of their parents about where they'd be that surprisingly (*or not*) they'd all managed to swallow and accept after a couple of follow-up questions here and there. Well, Eddie had come up with his own story. But his mom was a special case (*always had been*) and it was only because Eddie had threatened to run away and *not* come back, that she'd relented and allowed her *Eddie Bear* to join this "summer camp". They were now good to search for Richie without worrying their families for at least seven days. He just hopes it'll be enough time.

Next to him, Ben is fiddling with the strap of his backpack that is digging into his meaty shoulder.

“D-do you need h-h-help?” Bill asks, realizing that out of all their packs, Ben’s and Mike’s are probably the heaviest. Ben with books and printouts of various articles that he’d promised he’d review with them once they were on their way and Mike with whatever gear (*weapons*) he’d managed to stash from the farm without his grandfather noticing. Stanley, Bill, and Eddie had split up amongst themselves food, water, clothing, and a first aid kit.

Ben shakes his head at the offer, giving Bill a little distracted smile.

“Do you know that it’ll take us approximately 20 hours to get there? Maybe more depending on how many stops the bus will need to take. If we could drive ourselves, it’d be more like 16 but maybe not. It’s hard to take into account things like traffic.” He’s rambling a bit but Bill doesn’t mind listening. Although, it makes him frown that it’s going to take them *that* long until they reach Hawkins. “Now the fastest would be by plane. And that’s...”

Mike’s making a slow whistle while shaking his head.

“Boy, where do you keep all of that information stored?” Ben flushes at the question but grins.

“What? It’s cool.”

“Uh huh...” But the smile that’s on Mike’s face is kind and the tone in his voice is only mildly teasing. There’s a yearning in Bill to hear Richie’s ebullient voice popping up to say “*no, no... not cool...*” amusement clear in the teasing tone gentling the words that could have otherwise ripped Ben’s self-esteem down. But there’s silence instead and Bill just swallows hard.

“What did you learn about Hawkins?” Stanley asks as he joins them, passing tickets to each of them in turn. Eddie gives his a weird look and without saying anything, Stanley simply rolls his eyes and keeps it for him. No doubt Eddie doesn’t want to touch something that has about a billion different germs on there.

Ben plays with his for a bit and then says with only a slightly shaky voice, “Well, it doesn’t have quite the long history as Derry does. But weird things have happened there.”

“Derry like weird things?” Mike asks, broad shoulder tensing.

“...I don’t know. How would you quantify a kid going missing, being found dead and buried by his family only to have him be found alive a couple days later? Or a lab being found guilty for killing a teenager and having tried to bury the truth?”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck...” Eddie mutters, eyes wide.

“That’s...” Mike shakes his head again and glances at where a bus is coming their way. Hopefully it’s the one they need to get on. It’s hot and humid already and he can feel the sweat forming where his backpack is resting against his back. He knows it’s hot and humid. But Ben’s words are leaving him chilled too.

“W-w-when?” Bill asks. Ben glances at him while biting his bottom lip nervously. He’d done the math, of course he’d done the math. Because the second he’d found the newspaper clippings, his heart had dropped. He hadn’t wanted to be *right* about this for once. He had wanted to be able to come back to his friends and tell them that he’d been able to find nothing strange. Nothing Derry level strange at least. But he’d found something alright. It wasn’t quite the high rates of adult deaths and missing and dead children in lovely quaint old Derry but it was still... bizarre.

Ben’s stomach had tightened and frozen and he hadn’t been able to eat since finding the few articles he’d found. He’d felt slightly better surrounded by his friends and it had been easier to babble about random facts rather than focus on what he’d found. Rather than put to words the thoughts that he’d started to have as he’d blindly made copies of what he’d found at the library.

They’re all looking at him, nervous and tight in their muscles as they wait for him to just say it.

“About the same time as when...” He swallows hard and then expels the air hard through his nose. “... the first kids here started

going missing back in September..."

Ben can't look at Bill's face when he says the month that Georgie disappeared. He knows it'll be like seeing someone get sucker punched.

Tbc...

A/N - You're all amazingly awesome! I hope you all know that!!! You're ongoing support leaves me wordless. <3 I'll be back and hopefully posting regularly after my travels are done. Sending you all much love and wishes of great days ahead!

6. Chapter 6

Summary for the Chapter:

While the Losers are traveling to Hawkins, the twins are trying to make sense of what's happening to them while the Party are trying to shake off the shock of what they found in that cabin.

Chapter 6

Day 8 and 9

The brain craves routine and so it creates one even when there's little to work with. There are still no windows or clocks to be able to tell when day starts and when night ends. But there are visits and walks outside the room that becomes theirs and theirs alone.

Brian - the no expression, no free will, no better than a lifeless android of a man - becomes their routine. That and the armed guard that always seems to follow him now that Dr. Brenner is gone. He comes and gets them, walking them from one room to the next depending on the goal for the day. Whether it's to get blood work done and other measurements such as their height, weight, and blood pressure or to start testing them for ESP. Extrasensory perceptions. Because according to Dr. Brenner, their mother's role in these experiments had made them Sensitives. Not quite like Eleven whose ESP had been clear from day one but... individuals with untapped potential. Malleable with the right *incentives* and *programming*.

Of course, there were naturally born Sensitives and Dr. Brenner had his eye on one to take their places if they failed to live up to this... potential. Mike didn't want the poor bastard to have that fate forced upon them, whoever it was. He also didn't want to remain here. And there was a feeling that even if they didn't live up to their potential, it wasn't like they'd get a free pass back to their family and friends. There was also this other feeling telling him that he somehow knew who the other Sensitive that Dr. Brenner already had identified

and would be incredibly upset at having them pulled in.

Richie had scoffed at first, the Voices strained and lame in his attempt to ... Mike wasn't quite sure what had been Richie's goal to be honest. To distract their new guardian and freak scientist from experimenting on them? To show the absurdity of their new reality? Maybe. Whatever. It hadn't worked.

Mike himself hadn't been able to quite stay in the present moment. His mind had been stuck replaying the grainy scene in the cabin. It's funny, maybe funny was the wrong word, but it was the sounds that got to him the most. Hearing his friends' voices and their reactions to the sight, hearing Will desperately saying that they'd been there... and then Hopper.

Mike closes his eyes and takes a deep breath.

The Party and Hopper had been close to finding them he supposes. Just days late. And now? Now he isn't sure he wants them to continue looking.

The *incentive* had been clear.

Be good lab rats and we'll let your friends live. But best hope they don't come sticking their noses too close or else...

The best threat hadn't even needed to be verbalized.

Today must be an ESP day. Mike winces but doesn't open his eyes as cold gel is placed in different spots against his forehead and temple. The electrodes follow next and warm up quickly to the temperature of his skin. Nothing is said as they're placed carefully but Richie is humming under his breath somewhere in the room. Mike can't concentrate long enough to identify the song. He's not sure it matters in the long run.

The calloused hands leave him and there's the swishing of a lab coat brushing against clothes as the man walks away. The humming stops and Mike knows that it's Richie's turn to get prepped.

"Twelve, you'll stay here while Thirteen, you'll come with me." That's new and it makes Mike's eyes fly open just in time to see

Richie's expression take on a look of fear.

"What? Why?"

It's the sound of the guard straightening up in a threatening way that answers his question. Mike catches Richie's eye and shakes his head. Don't fight this. Just go. Just follow.

The fresh tattoo still aches and pulls at his skin on his wrist. He knows Richie's does too. Brian has never uttered their names out loud. He's only used their numbers. He never realized how dehumanizing it actually would be. Intellectually and maybe instinctively, he'd known but to actually experience it? It was different in a visceral way. Mike knows he'll be whispering their real names over and over in the white box of a room once they're back so that they can hold on to them. He's not Twelve. He's Mike. Mikey. Mikey-baby even. But he'll never be Twelve. Just like Richie isn't Thirteen. And he's not bad luck. Whatever his twin says.

Richie makes a noise but gets up with Brian and walks with him out of this room. The door shuts and Mike is left with just the guard and his gun. He doesn't know how much time passes but it feels never ending.

When they're finally reunited and given a shot of *something* before being rushed back into their rooms, Mike doesn't even have to ask before Richie starts to explain, ignoring the bar that is supposed to be food that they've been given to eat. "I was shown pictures. Loads of them that I was supposed to *think* at you. Do they even know how fucking crazy they are?"

Mike simply shakes his head. What else can be said?

...

It takes the Party members days to recover from their day at the Winterwell's cabin. Hopper tells Nancy, Steve and Jonathan where he found them and what they saw in hopes that the older teens will help him in his quest to keep the younger ones out of the investigation from here on out. It's also more than that. He wants to make sure they stay safe and that they have someone in their lives

that they can talk to.

He isn't aware that even without his intervention, Steve and Jonathan would have found out anyway. Still, it had helped because none of the Party members had been in any shape to put their experiences into words. Dustin took comfort in Steve's presence and the brotherly banter had been what had helped soothe him more than even his mother and their family cat greeting him that night could have. It's helpful that his mother has long ago accepted that he's eccentric because she doesn't question why Steve is suddenly staying over for sleepovers despite their obvious age gap. Honestly, she's just happy for the company and witty conversations.

Lucas stays with his family. It's isolating in some ways, not having someone he lives with that *knows*, like really knows but it's also buffering. He can hide in the confines of the four walls of his family home and pretend like everything is fine. Everything is normal as long as he doesn't step outside and see his friends. Or turn the television on which still talks about Mike and Richie's disappearance. When it is turned on, he slips out from that particular room and picks a fight with his bratty sister to drown out the sound. It may be cowardly but he needs it and grips onto it with a death hold.

Max's situation is a bit more complex. After all, she'd been scheduled to fly out and see her dad. She'd been looking forward to it ever since she'd moved to Hawkins, Indiana. And now? She's canceled her trip. Her mother looks at her with sad understanding eyes even though she doesn't know shit. Max cries in her room where no one can see and no one can hear her. She's not crying about the trip, although maybe a small part of her is. She's crying because she wants her dad. She wants her old life in a way she hasn't in months now. She's also crying because she's scared. She'd gotten lost in the earlier adrenaline and confidence that they'd fix things because they'd fixed things before and the Party is fucking invincible! They have a mage for God's sake... but now...Now, there's a part of her that's convinced Mike and Richie are dead and there's no fixing that.

Will follows Jonathan or maybe it's Jonathan following Will. It's a bit hard to differentiate because both want to be in the same space. It vacillates between the Wheeler household and El's cabin in the woods or when their mother is home, Hopper drops El off at their

house. In the first option, Will finds himself spending his time with Nancy and Holly, carefully watching the sisters and how his brother seamlessly fits himself into their relationship. He watches as his brother takes on mundane tasks that he's always done in their own household and suddenly gets clarity as to how much Jonathan actually does to keep everything working smoothly forward. He coddles when needed, he challenges and pushes when needed, and he provides comfort and space too. It's always a balm and Will hopes that he can only gain that much skill at helping one day. In the second option, Will finds himself keeping El company with Jonathan taking a less active role. He gets used to the sight and the smell of blood because it's always present. Whether it pulls other images to the forefront of his mind depends on the time and day and his mood. In the last option, his mother flits between all of them anxiously wanting to mother them and do more than is actually humanly possible. However, she's pulled off several miracles already so he's not ready to dismiss the possibility outright.

Will has overheard every conversation between his mother and Hopper and has loved her with every cell of his being even more than he thought was possible. She's a fighter and she's fighting for Mike and Richie just as much as she'd fought for him.

It's comforting.

It's also what helps snap him out of the numbing fog that has wrapped around him the second Hopper had stepped into that cabin.

His mother is fighting, searching for Mike and Richie and what the hell is he doing besides shuffling between the three households, fingers mindlessly playing with the beads he'd picked up? What is the Party doing?

Nothing.

Will let's go of the beads he'd currently been rolling between his fingers. He knows that they'll be safe in his pocket. His fingers come to find his supercomm and switches it on. It crackles to life and El stirs next to him. She's so pale these days. There are dark circles under her eyes and he wonders if he looks the same. He doesn't remember the last time he's had a full night's sleep.

“Lucas? It’s Will. Over.” When the supercomm calls don’t work, he reaches out by phone. One by one. And one by one, each party member turns their supercomms back on again, shaking the shock and grief off. It’s hard and some find it harder to shake off than others. The hesitation and fear and anger are hard to fight off as well. But Will’s able to find the words that help spark the hope back up.

And any hope is better than none.

...

His upper arm is sore and Richie swears under his breath viciously as the syringe is stuck rather viciously there like it has been for the past several days. The fucker could have the decency to change arms once in awhile. But nooo, it’s like the asshole got off on the fact that this one part of his arm was now starting to look like a fucking pincushion.

“You know C3PO had more personality than you. And fucking better bedside manners.” He yanks his arm free once Android pulls the needle out of his skin. “What the fuck are you shooting us up with anyway?” Richie hisses, trying to rub the area, ignoring how the bead of blood is now smearing on his pale skin and tips of his fingers. Whatever the fuck it is, he hates how it makes him feel.

It always starts with his heart starting to thump hard in his chest, blood swarming into his ears, and then the feeling of being flushed hits. Sometimes it starts with his toes, sometimes it starts elsewhere in his body but it always comes. Inevitably, he will start to sweat and he’ll feel like his body is swaying even when sitting still. The lights in the room flicker and become life like. Real. Dancing in the room and he’s sworn he’s heard the lights speak to him.

Mikey says it’s not true. But he’s heard them speak. And they say nothing good. Always doom and gloom and portents of ill omens. The walls vibrate with the sound of the lights speaking and, and... sometimes if Mikey is in the room with him, which more often than not, he is, Mikey *melts*. He’s there but he’s not, like he’s constantly melting and being re-made in front of him. And it doesn’t matter how often and how loudly he tells Mikey to stop, he doesn’t. He can’t.

Colors become too frantic. Noises too physical. It's like all his senses are under assault and his brain is trying to match Mikey's melting because he can feel it liquefying in the space between his ears. One day he knows it's just going to spill out and go drip, drip, drip and hey, at least he won't be floating. No, no. Never floating. Floating bad. Simply dripping.

Drip, drip...

It's starting again.

He can tell.

Drip.

Richie tries to catch Mikey's eyes. Tries to ground himself in the reality of his twin but it doesn't help. It has yet to help.

One time, he'd tried to close his eyes. It had been like seeing the inside of his body. All bloody red with lightning arcing behind his closed lids before suddenly seeing his mother's dead dull eyes staring back at him. He'd nearly scratched his own eyes open in response and had rolled off the cot.

Mikey had said...

Mikey...

Richie closes his eyes briefly, not wanting to but not able to help it either as they're watering, but his mother's eyes are there. Waiting for him. They're always open now. Staring. Waiting.

He wonders if his lips become hers. He wonders if he opens his mouth now that his lips are hers if she'll speak the words out loud that Mikey has never let him hear. Had always woken him before he could hear them.

He licks his lips and finds his tongue to be heavy. Wet. Yet dry. Rough yet soft. Tingling. He licks his lips again.

And again.

There is noise that spills the air and the air shimmers with the noise and tickles his entire body. It's laughter. Is it his? Is it hers? Is it Mikey's?

Mikey. Mikey. Mikey.

Drip, drip, drip...

Hello Mother...

Drip.

Bye bye Brain.

Drip.

Tbc...

A/N - Thank you everyone for all of the continued support and kind words. I am back and had safe travels. :) I promise that the next chapter will have the Losers and the Party meeting for all of you waiting for that moment. <3

7. Chapter 7

Summary for the Chapter:

When the Losers Club and the Party collides this is what happens in Hawkins, Indiana.

Chapter 7

Day 10

“Who the hell are you?!” The voice is deep and suspicious and makes all of them jump out of their half crouch in the bushes near the house. “What the *fuck* are you all doing?!” It’s a boy, about their age and scowling at them darkly. He’s got a military bandana around his head and he’s clearly not alone in having discovered them.

“Oh God! Oh Fuck!” Eddie is muttering under his breath by Bill’s side as they take in the rest of the people who’ve found them.

“Creeps. Bet you they’re all creepers wanting to spy on Nancy. We should call Hopper. Or better yet, Steve.” A second voice adds to the first.

“Shut up Dustin.” It’s a girl’s voice this time. “Do either of you even recognize these mouth breathers?” She asks, tone demanding as she glances at her counterparts quickly. The two guys are actually on either side of her. Making that three of them in total Bill realizes and they’re all talking and exchanging looks with one another too quickly for any of the Losers to get a word in edgewise. He can feel the Losers try and inch closer together as much as they can without drawing too much attention to themselves in the process. Not like it would help as they’re clearly the main focus and point of contention for the three.

“Nope.” The curly haired one apparently called Dustin mutters. “They don’t look familiar at all...” It makes his frown

deepen on his young face while the one that had called out to them first just takes a menacing step forward, fists already formed.

“Look, wait! This is a misunderstanding.” Good old Ben. He’s the first to find his voice in a way that is helpful and Bill is eternally grateful to him.

“Y-yeah. We-w-we’re here for Richie.” Bill is finally able to get the words out, trying to step in front of his group to protect them.

“Richie?!” That seems to startle the three of them although the redhead suddenly looks like the world makes sense again. “Wait a minute.” Her light blue-green eyes look over each of them in turn and Bill has the distinct feeling of being sized up.

“What is it Mad Max?” Dustin asks eyes glancing at her.

“Are you guys the Losers?! Like Richie’s Losers?”

“What? What are you talking about, Max?” The guy who’s been looking menacing suddenly falters and is looking between them and her in a dubious manner.

“The Losers...” The so-called Dustin mutters as he slaps his hand to his forehead. “Of course, totally obvious. *Not...* come on Maxine. They’re probably just assholes looking for a thrill, a big adventure after having read the coverage about the kidnapping. Jerks.”

“Do not even Henderson...”

“It is us... I mean, we are the Losers. And we are here for Richie but not because we want a thrill or, or an adventure.” Stanley cries out now, hands up. “We’re most definitely not creeps and we have no idea who Nancy is.” There’s a slight tone of offended disgust at the idea that they’ve been taken to be peeping Toms.

“See!” Max, Mad Max, Maxine or whatever the hell her name is, says with a glare thrown at Dustin.

“Oh come on! Likely story. How do we know you are who you say you are? I mean, prove to us that you know Richie...”

“Why should we?!” Eddie counters, fear suddenly gone and looking angry. “I mean, who the fuck are you? And what are you all doing here?”

“Excuse you?”

“URGH! Boys!” The redhead yells and gets in between the two groups. “Enough already! We’ll take turns, okay?” And without looking or waiting for a response, she starts. “We’re at the Wheeler’s house because we’re friends with Mike and Richie and we were helping watch Holly, their little cousin while Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler went to the police station. I’m Max. This is Lucas and Dustin. We’ve known Richie since he got here and he told me about the Losers...tell me, what’s the best way of shutting him up?”

“...beep, beep Richie...” Eddie whispers.

“Eds, right?” She points to him and then scans the rest of the group and starts pointing them out, one by one. “Mike, Ben... Stanley... leaving you to be... Billiam.”

...

They bring the Losers to the cabin to *really* talk. Lucas doesn’t like the idea and makes it clear. However, with Max and Dustin logically arguing how it may be their best option right now, he simply lets the issue drop with a shake of his head. It’s clear that Lucas is still suspicious of them and Dustin gets that, he does. He’s still suspicious of them too but... he’s also desperate. He’ll take whatever he can at this moment to get their search moving back in a more hopeful and productive direction. Not that they don’t already have a plan in the works but still. If these guys can help, they need it. He doesn’t want a repeat of their first search that had led them to finding a very dead Dr. Winterwell and his equally dead family.

Dustin radios ahead a warning that they’re bringing strangers to the mix once the Wheelers come back and he prepares to make a convincing argument as to why but El’s response doesn’t allow for it. It’s just a whispered okay and then it goes to static and Dustin bites the inside of his cheek hard until all he can taste is blood. He’s scared shitless for Richie and Mike. He’s worried about everyone else

handling the loss, especially El. And Mike's family. And Will. And... He closes his eyes briefly and gives another wordless prayer that the nightmare ends soon.

The group remains silent when they make their way to the cabin an hour later, careful to not leave any marks that could be followed. They hope anyway. Lucas is trailing behind using his dad's military training to ensure it and no one questions him.

Max is the one who's leading the pack and she's the one who does the secret knock that causes the door to swing wide open. If the Losers are surprised to find no one behind the door, they don't say anything. They simply all file in and blink at the relative darkness.

Deeper within the house, Will struggles to his feet, gently moving El from his shoulder to lay her back down onto the couch. As he makes his way over to them, he flicks on a light as he moves from what passes for the living room to the entrance.

"Hey... so what's going on?" He asks, eyes wide as he takes in the new guys suddenly cramping the small house.

"We found help." Max mutters. "And they've known Richie since he was..." She makes a motion to below her knees. "Figured maybe they'd be able to fill in some gaps regarding his childhood and one Went Tozier."

"...the Losers?" Will asks, tone curious but also doubtful as he scans the group again.

"B-b-bill." Bill throws out a hand. "It's nice to meet you."

"Will..." The rest of the introductions happen as they move closer to the couch. El remains quiet and passive but Max frowns as she notices the hints of blood having been scrubbed off just below her nose. She decidedly plonks her ass down next to the girl, shoving into her and taking her hand, giving it a hard squeeze. El gives her a weak little smile before squeezing back.

The rest take that as their cue to find spots to sit down. Will, ever used to playing host when Mike hadn't been able to for their

own group, is the one who gathers chairs and forms them in a loose circle around the couch. Max watches the other boys carefully, not really acknowledging the way that Lucas makes his appearance and sits on the arm of the couch, his hip nestling right next to her head. Dustin takes up Will's original spot right on El's other side.

It's interesting, Max thinks, as she watches the Losers. There's a parallel between them and her own boys that she can't deny. It makes her remember the research that Dustin had completed what feels like was years ago on twins. Even separated, they'll live somewhat similar lives. Pick similar friends... with the only difference being the roles the brothers had played in their respective groups. Richie the clown and Mike the leader. Obviously.

It's so odd to see people she'd only heard in stories come to life before her eyes. It's too bad Bev, Richie's so called *other half*, isn't here. It would have been nice to have another girl in the mix.

Eddie is wrinkling his nose as he tries not to make it obvious that he's inspecting the cleanliness of the chair he's been told he can sit on. He can't help it. His throat is tight with anxiety and the amount of *dust* in this *shack* canNOT be healthy. Still, at a look from Bill, he ends up sitting and biting down on the strong need to take one of the baby wipes from his backpack and clean the space that's now touching his ass.

His shorts are only a thin protection from the masses of germs that have to be growing here. A little shudder runs through him and he tries to focus on his breath and counting backwards from 100 to get rid of the thoughts about how many germs he already had on him from the fucking bus ride and the current ones from this chair that are now in contact with his clothes and his skin and...

"So..." Bill clears his throat once Will settles on the ground close to El's feet.

"What's actually happening? With the search? Did any ransom calls get made?" Eddie jumps in. Because grit his teeth and sit down he can do, but he can't take listening and waiting through Bill's stuttering sentences to get to the actual business. There are some things that just need to be moved along. He ignores the side glare

that he can see Stanley throw his way.

“...no. No ransom calls.” Lucas is the one who answers, arms crossed tightly in front of him. “The investigation is still active but they don’t really have much to go on.”

“...no leads?” Ben asks, voice slightly incredulous yet polite all the same. “Was Hawkins Lab a dead end?”

The Party members all stiffen at the name and Lucas looks more menacing and thunderous at the same time where he’s perched like the human equivalent of a bird of prey.

“...what?” Dustin just looks shocked. “What the hell do you all know about Hawkins Lab?”

“Well, it’s not exactly top secret.” Ben mutters, ducking his head to hide his reddened chubby cheeks. “Hawkins has only made the headlines in the news a couple of times. Each time, it’s been due to that lab...” He’s opening his backpack and grabbing thick folders that seem to be bursting at the seams. “... I think anyway. It wasn’t really clear if they were ever linked to that Byer’s kid’s disappearance.”

If the Party members had stiffened before, it pales in comparison to how statue-like they are now. Each of them carefully not looking at one another.

“...What did I say?” Ben asks.

Will gives a little sigh before giving them a slight wave. “Maybe I should have introduced myself with my first and last name. I’m Will Byers. And yeah...” The rest is shared barely over a whisper even though he *knows* that this place isn’t bugged. “Hawkins Lab definitely played a role in what happened to me.”

(The both times goes unsaid because these guys may be Richie’s Losers but Will really doesn’t want to take the trip back down this particular memory lane.)

...

The two groups continue to talk, each sharing their own research about Hawkins, Hawkins Lab, and Richie. The Losers don't have too much to say on Went Tozier besides that he is (*was?*) an orthodontist that had been more absent than present in Richie's life back in Derry. They confirm that he's been missing since he's wife apparent suicide though and that as far as they're aware the Derry Law Enforcement has dropped the investigation. He's simply one more missing person added to a very extended list of missing people the town has. It seems like the infuriating man will continue to be a dead end and his topic is dropped rather quickly.

Both the Party and the Losers agree about Hawkins Lab needing to be investigated on a deeper level and start forming a plan (*really adding to the one that had already been in development but the Losers don't need to be told about that*). Neither group is aware of how much both are leaving unsaid.

The Losers don't mention *It* and all that they've survived together already. It doesn't seem like its needed or that it would be helpful in any way. Especially because there's nothing currently going on that seems to point to a similar creature being the cause behind Richie's disappearance. And because it's clear to them at least that Richie may have told the group about the Losers but not about *It*.

The Party keeps out the fact that El has powers and that her mother was part of the study. It's just safer this way. They do however share some of Will's experience and that Richie and Mike's mother was part of the study. It's this little fact that is causing them to believe more than anything else that the shut down Lab is involved somehow, someway.

“...so when is ... you said Kali?” At a nod, Mike continues his original question. “...getting here?”

The Party members all look to El who tilts her head. It would appear to anyone who doesn't know the girl that she's simply considering the question. In reality, she's probing her surrounding, seeing if her sister is close enough now to feel without getting pulled into the Void. She's not and El sighs before looking at her hands.

“Either tonight or tomorrow.”

“That’s not bad if it’s tomorrow...” Ben mutters. “It gives us time to see if we can find the building plans for the place. That should be information made accessible to the public and the library or town hall should have those...” Dustin nods, hands playing with his hat carefully.

“We actually have that covered.” He mutters.

“You do?” Ben asks surprised.

“Yeah,” Lucas jumps in. “It was our next plan of action... to scope the place out after following up on the whole... Tozier lead.” He’s already shared how Hopper had found Dr. Evans and her family killed as well. Ms. Sandy is still missing but it seems that her entire identity was a lie anyway. It should have struck them before how convenient it was that their school suddenly had a counselor following Will’s first disappearance. In any case, it doesn’t do them any good to dwell on that particular fact. The Party is letting Hopper continue investigating her. They know they wouldn’t have the means to get very far trying to figure out her actual identity.

“We made copies of the blue print and we’ve narrowed it down to a couple ways to get not only onto the grounds but also into the building itself.” Lucas pauses before saying quietly. “We should figure out who should come and who should stay back. All of us going in just doesn’t make any sense and could be a bigger liability.”

El’s eyes flash dangerously then but she stays mute. The Party has already voted her OUT of coming which is part of the reason Kali is even on her way to Hawkins. Because if El can’t go then at least Kali can and will provide them with some sort of powerful back up. She doesn’t like the plan and will most likely never like the plan but it is what it is at this point. Max can feel the tension growing in the other girl and simply gives her hand another big squeeze.

“K-Kali is a must with her previous history of the b-b-building.” Bill starts, voice confident. He misses Dustin and Lucas sharing a glance at the way the teen is stepping into this leadership role for both groups without really anyone’s say so. It’s clear he is the

leader in his group and it makes their own Mike's absence that much stronger. It also irritates the hell out of Lucas who's had to swallow down already multiple objections simply because he doesn't like the feeling of having someone take over. What's been harder to deal with is that Bill never says anything wrong or bad and never words things like an ultimatum. It's just... Lucas shakes his head and tries to let the irritation go. There are bigger things at stake here. "Lucas, how many p-p-people would you suggest as a good number for the-the infiltration team?"

The question takes him off guard but he responds anyway. It makes him wonder though if maybe Bill is more aware of how he's coming off and how it's impacting the Party members. "Originally, we were thinking of 3, maybe 4 if Kali wanted someone from her group to come with and at least 2 of us staying behind. We have supercomms that we'd keep in contact with."

Bill nods at that like it's a good plan. "That makes sense..."

"Who was in the original team...?" Stan asks, arms still tight across his chest.

"Lucas and Steve." Dustin steps into answer. "Not that we'd informed Steve of that just yet but he's cool. We know he'd step in and do it. If not, Max, El, Will, and I were planning on being able to provide instructions about the blue plan from here... as well as be able to call 911 right away if it all went to shit. We do have a direct line to the Chief of Police after all."

"Who's Steve now?" Eddie asks. There have been too many names thrown in and it's hard to keep track of everyone.

"Mike's sister, I guess really older cousin's ex boyfriend. He's handy with a bat." The answer is more confusing but Eddie can only nod and figure that it'll make sense at some point. Or not. He doesn't actually care if it brings Richie back. And if it gets him out of this fucking dusty cabin faster.

"Okay..." Bill nods. "And I, I'd like to go in too, if that's okay." He volunteers.

“Same here.” Mike offers quietly. “I may not hold a candle to Richie’s bat swinging... or your Steve’s... but...I can fight.”

“So, Lucas, Steve, Kali, Bill, and Mike.” Dustin ticks the names off on his fingers. “And maybe one of Kali’s buddies. Sounds like the search party has been decided.”

“And the rest of us will stay here.” Stan says softly, nodding to himself. One long pale finger has been unconsciously rubbing his scarred cheek. He doesn’t like that they’ll be split up but he also can’t deny that there’s some relief at not having to go into the shut down lab. He notices that Bill is watching him now and he drops his hands despite the still nervous energy that makes them want to move and simply do something. Anything. “I...” He starts. “I realize that in our haste to get here and search for Richie, we forgot to think of something.” He admits. Now all of them are staring at him. “We don’t have anywhere to stay tonight.”

“Oh.” It’s Will’s voice that breaks the silence that suddenly descended at Stan’s observation. “Well, I guess I can ask mom if she’s okay having all of you over. If not...” He trails off, looking at the remainder of the Party members. “...I’m sure we can figure something out.”

Tbc...

8. Chapter 8

Summary for the Chapter:

Mike and Richie are still learning how to cope with their new situation while Kali and her gang arrives to join the search for the missing twins.

Chapter 8

Day 11

Mike and Richie are sitting across one another, Brian sitting just behind Mike so he can look over his shoulder. Dr. Brenner's last visit had determined that they were still much too weak to have their ESP tested by distance. Brian had agreed with a ducked head and now here they are.

Mike is sweating, the hospital shirt sticking uncomfortably against his skin. He's looking at cards. He supposes it's the cards that Richie had been given all the previous times. But who knows. Maybe they're not. He has a feeling that Brian had skipped some steps in their testing and had tried to do things a bit faster than was normal. Dr. Brenner had said something about the current cards being called Zener cards or something. He'd sat with them, showing both of them the strange cards with the various simple symbols printed on their flat shiny surfaces and explained how the test would work.

The one facing Mike currently is a simple circle. He's been staring at it for minutes now so long and so hard that he feels the way his eyebrows are pinched together. The muscles there are sore from the tension.

He feels warm liquid gather under his nose and his head is pounding. It's not his first nosebleed here. He's lost count of how many he's had. The first time, Brian had seemed excited. He'd leaned in and started writing down something very rapidly on his clipboard.

Mike had wanted to tell him to fuck off and to have a tissue or *something* please and thank you, bastard. But he'd known better than to bother asking. He'd simply used his arm to wipe at the blood until it had finally stopped dripping.

Richie's eyes are glazed and Mike knows what the looks mean. He's more worried about Richie's health here than he is about his own. Richie seems way more reactive to whatever they're being given and has spent hours screaming and writhing where he sits or lay. Mike's not sure what scares him the most – when he can understand what Richie's yelling about or when it's complete gibberish.

For Mike, although it's never a fun experience, it... it well... he at least doesn't remember screaming or have memories of *melting*. It's more like everything is louder and clearer and just like all his senses come alive in this brilliant explosion. It's not scary. It's not always beautiful. It just is. He has come to learn that he just has to ride the wave out and the part that tends to bug him the most is always the way his heart aches at having been racing for so damned long and how parched and feverish he feels.

But they haven't been injected for awhile (*maybe a day?*) now and though Mike still feels dehydrated and slightly feverish, he no longer feels like he's drugged. He's not sure it's out of Richie's system as much as it's out of his.

A slight clearing of a throat makes him drag his eyes back to the card. He tries to concentrate on the symbol and the symbol only but he can't help his worry for Richie as it continues to worm it's way back in every thought he has. They're going to die in here if he doesn't manage to get them out. Richie is going to die because whatever they're giving him...

Richie sits upright, the fog in his eyes suddenly clearing.

"I'm not going to fucking die okay? We promised. Never letting each other go." The words are harsh and slightly slurred but it's him. Mike blinks at his twin in surprise though and feels his mouth fall open. "You're giving me a headache. Stop it with the mother henning. And I don't care about the fucking circle."

“...Shit...” Mike breathes, dropping the card as if it burns him. Behind him, he hears Brian start writing the fuck out of his clipboard.

...

Kali steps out of the car and stretches briefly. Funshine is out of the car and by her side in an instant, his strong presence a comfort to her. She doesn't like being out here in the boonies so close to the lab that had created the monster that she is now. Dottie and Axel leave the car soon after, leaving only Mick inside. She knows her friend doesn't like the situation either. None of them do. They'd all been against her choice of coming here reminding her several times over that Jane had left *them*. Her choice in leaving meant they didn't owe her shit.

Yet here she is.

And here they are. They followed her anyway. They wanted to be there to protect her when the inevitable trap closed in on her. And Mick was hesitating in their stolen car because she was ready to turn the gas back on and drive them all away and back to the city's dirty protection.

Kali sighs and looks at the house that's in front of them. It's a typical suburban home with some wear and tear and some crap in the backyard that really should have been carried off to the nearest dumpsite. It makes her skin crawl, the normalcy of it all.

She takes a step forward before Axel gets the chance to open his big mouth and complain once again about this stupid decision and how its going to bite them all in the ass. She hears it as he snaps his mouth shut, opportunity lost. The front door opens before she reaches it and Jane comes out.

Her younger sister from another mother looks different than she'd last seen her. She's taller for one but paler and exhausted looking. Her hair is down to her shoulders now and less curly. It hangs in dull waves, thick and clearly not brushed. She is barefooted.

“Kali...” He voice is still as soft as it'd been though when they

had first been reunited and Kali blinks, surprised at the strong hold she suddenly finds herself in. “You’re really here. Thank you. Thank you.” There’s warm wetness that’s spilling onto Kali’s shoulder and she finds herself awkwardly wrapping her own arms around the slighter girl.

“Well you called, didn’t you little sister? Of course, I’m here.” She says instead of asking why? And what happened? Where are all these friends you claimed you needed to save and that would protect you in return?

The door opens again and other teens start to slowly creep out onto the front porch watching the scene play out. Kali counts them, knows that the rest of her gang are counting them too. Nine that look to be about the same age as Jane while three stand behind the larger group, looking just slightly older. She frowns at them and slowly pulls away from Jane.

“Care to introduce and explain Jane?”

...

“I should be going in.” Nancy says again, frustrated that Mike’s friends and apparently Richie’s friends who had come all the way from fucking Derry, Maine have created this elaborate plan without letting anyone else know until just now. It’s a dangerous plan. A stupid plan. And she knows that instead of arguing to be allowed to go with them, she should be calling Hopper instead.

Kali shoots her a dead look behind her kohl-smudged eyes. It’s neither promising nor threatening. Simply unimpressed.

“None of you should be going in. This is a stupid plan, Jane.”

“I need to find them.” Jane states, glaring at her sister. “Please.”

“No. If it’s true that Hawkins Lab has them, you’re all better off leaving this thing alone.” Kali continues, voice strong and uncompromising. “You should know better.” This is targeting Jane alone. “I gave you a chance to come with me...with us... to hunt

these men down. You wanted a normal life. You came back here.”

Jane doesn’t drop her eyes from Kali’s. “They needed my help.” She simply states. “I was needed here.”

“And look where it’s gotten you...” Kali can’t help but observe, knowing that her words will hurt. She has always been good at hurting. Even without her powers.

“This isn’t her fault.” Will snaps causing Kali to look away from her little sister briefly. Though it will never show, there is surprise inside her at the second smallest of the boys challenging her in this way. “If you don’t want to help, you don’t have to. But we’re doing this and we’re doing this tonight. Nancy can take your place.”

Kali frowns at him, the urge to throw at this kid his worst fears pulsing along with her blood flowing throughout her body. She closes her hands in fists and waits the urge out.

“Oh no need...” Funshine speaks up and Kali can’t help but throw him a look at having him speak for her. “After all, we may finally find that elusive Dr. Brenner.” He’s actually speaking to her and not for her. His words a calming yet chiding message directly targeting her. There’s an opportunity here that shouldn’t be dismissed.

The Party members all look confused. The Losers have been lost since Kali and her gang have arrived and have remained for the most part quiet; speaking with looks alone amongst themselves.

“Dr. Brenner is dead.” Lucas says after clearing his throat. Kali spares him a look before focusing back on Jane.

“No. He’s not...Dear old Papa would never die so easily on us, right Jane?” The fear that sparks in Jane’s eyes doesn’t actually cause her pleasure. But there is some sort of emotion that it fuels in her. She simply sighs and stretches. “So tonight we all hunt the bastard down. Lovely.” She glances over the bunch again and hides an internal eye roll. Perhaps she and Funshine will find a way to lose them all before they get inside the building. And perhaps, she’ll also stumble over a basket of kittens and puppies at the end of a fucking

rainbow.

God fuck this was going to be a shit show of epic proportions.

“Do any of you even know how to shoot a gun?” She asks, tone dry and already sure of the answer.

“I do.” Nancy snaps. “Which is why I should be going in. More so than Steve and his fucking baseball bat anyway.” That is surprising. The little preppy white girl doesn’t look like she could or would willingly do anything that could cause her to break a nail. Well hot damn, maybe she will end up finding that basketful of cuteness on this stupid journey after all.

And it is (*only slightly*) amusing watching the group bicker about the utter coolness of this Steve’s bat and the way he’s taken on a demodog. Whatever the fuck that is.

A/N - You all are wonderful and I'm continually overwhelmed by the kudos, the comments, the wonderful ideas and guesses as to what is coming next that you share with me. You all mean the world to me and I hope that the story continues to be one that you all enjoy.

9. Chapter 9

Summary for the Chapter:

The search for the twins continues...

Chapter 9

Day 12, 13, 14, 15

It is oppressingly stuffy in the cabin. There are too many people filling the space and El wishes once again that everyone would just leave already. That she could be left alone so she could do what she feels deep inside of her that she *needs* to do.

She hates these four walls. She hates the waiting. She hates how she's been put into a cage for her own good. Her own protection.

She only has the static of the supercomm in Dustin's hand and periodic updates provided to her by Lucas breaking the grating sound. Everyone who's been told to stay behind is quiet, anxiously holding their breath and waiting for those updates.

Well, Dustin isn't quiet and neither is Ben. The two are bent over the maps of the building telling those who are now successfully in the closed Hawkins Lab where to turn and which staircase to take.

El takes a deep breath and Will glances at her briefly before his large brown eyes turn back to watching the supercomm.

They need this trip to be successful.

...

Kali's face is expressionless as she walks down the hall, Funshine at her side. This mission is a waste of time and a dangerous venture at that. She doesn't buy that this lab is closed. She doesn't trust that the cameras – despite their lights being off – aren't actually recording their every move and that the recordings won't be fed

directly into the hands of the very people that they are hunting. The hunters becoming hunted. Not exactly how she wants to go...

What she does trust is Jane's assessment that Dr. Brenner is not in these walls. She does trust Jane saying that the place is empty. Or was when she walked through them in the Void just hours before. But only she knows that as the sisters had ended up meeting away from everyone else. Jane is still resisting the thought that Papa is indeed alive but that was a fight for another day. It doesn't change the fact that Kali trusts Jane. Trusts in her powers at the very least. And from what she gathered from her little sister's walk in the Void is that this was pointless. Dangerous but pointless. They wouldn't find the missing boys here.

Still, she's walking through these halls because despite their *father* not being a resident in this hellhole, perhaps he's left them a calling card. A clue that would finally lead her to where he is.

She's also here because it had been clear to her that these kids, these naïve clueless babies, were going to go ahead with their crazy plan no matter the cost. And that she couldn't live with. A monster she may be but not a completely heartless one. Not yet anyway.

Axel had spent quite some time last night in their beat up van pointing out all the ways that she was *clearly* growing soft. And not only soft but *stupid* too. She hadn't had any energy left in her to fight him on these points. She had finally shut him up when it was clear that his words were impacting the rest of the gang by letting him see the worst of the world's arachnids.

Well, he'd shut up after yelling and rolling out of the van. But at least, it had ended his one sided monologue.

The crackle of the supercomm causes her to pause. They really don't need that stupid device. It doesn't matter how long it's been since she's run away from here; she still remembers each nook and cranny. There are some things that you simply can't forget. Ever.

"Anything?" Dustin's voice is warbled and worried. The kid's dimples had been awfully charming and annoying at the same time

leaving her with the itch to either pinch the cheeks or smush them together. Thank fuck for impulse control.

“No, we’re still in the same hallway. We’re coming close to the elevator you’d mentioned...over.”

...

It becomes clear to them that they will need several days to do a thorough search of the building. It’s disappointing but it’s true and at least it keeps them all occupied and working towards the same goal.

Still, it hurts all the same to come back to the cabin empty handed and see El’s eyes well up with frustrated tears and see the way Eddie suddenly leaves, only to come back hours later with still wet cheeks.

...

It’s been three fucking long days already of searching the empty building and they’re about to start their fourth one. Eddie’s fragile nerves are this close to snapping outright. He knows it. He’s not as strong or as brave as the others think he is. He can feel it in the way his fingers are trembling as he tries to pass a brush through his hair, in the way his lungs tighten, in the way his throat is already closing up at the mere thought of what the day is going to look like and he’s left wheezing in apprehension as he finally decides that his hair is brushed enough, letting the brush fall back onto the counter with a loud clatter. He moves to the next task at hand and pulls on a clean t-shirt over his head. His hands blindly feel around in his pack that he’d brought with him into the bathroom for his inhaler and when it grips the container, it only brings a mild feeling of relief.

He’s going to go through all of the inhalers that he’s brought with him if he has to deal with another long day of being stuck in that dusty, microbe filled cabin. He’s going to go outright crazy. He can’t do it again. He just can’t.

Eddie takes a long puff from his inhaler before nodding to himself. He has to talk to someone. He has to get someone on his

side. To see that they can't all just keep doing what they have been doing. It's madness. The very definition of insanity. He slowly puts his inhaler back in his fanny pack, making sure to cinch the small pack securely around his waist before leaving the bathroom. He nods to Mike's unspoken question that yeah, he's done. The bathroom is all his to use.

Eddie scans the living room, eyes briefly pausing on each of his friends still there and reviewing his options. All of them will be sympathetic to his feelings; he knows this. But not all of them will go beyond feeling sympathetic and actually agree with him. It's what makes his eyes move quickly from Bill. He knows his friend is too focused on the mission at hand to discuss another plan right now. He also knows from experience that Bill's radiating confidence will just make him feel like a piece of shit, make him look down and away from that steady gaze and just... no. Bill isn't an option.

Eddie is quick to come to the conclusion that Ben isn't an option either. The larger boy is much too kind and much too polite to point out any possible flaws in Eddie's thought patterns and plan. But he's also incredibly stubborn. Eddie knows that Ben still has a lot of faith in their original plan and is becoming quite close to Dustin, the curly haired boy with a penchant for maps and curiosity voyages. He's heard them continue talking and planning out which parts to survey next over their supercomms during late hours of the night, despite everyone agreeing that sleep was really in order. And well, to be completely honest, Eddie's not sure he could handle Ben's deep knowing and sympathetic gaze without losing his shit right then and there.

His eyes move away from him and land on Stanley. Stanley who's slowly but methodically running his hands through his curls, gaze slightly unfocused. Eddie continues to watch as his friend pins his kippah in place, despite the miles and miles between him and his father. Eddie finds himself walking towards him, only pausing because of his startle response to the front door of the Byers' home being slammed open by some of the Party members coming to pick them up. Stanley's eyes catch his as Eddie tries to calm his suddenly pounding heart down. There must be something on his face that is communicating something to Stanley because both eyebrows start to

rise and Stanley's mouth opens slightly but Eddie shakes his head.

Not now.

Not here.

But soon.

It makes Stanley's frown grow but he nods after a moment and gets up in one smooth motion, long pale hands already moving to brush out the non-existent wrinkles from his clothes. This is something that Eddie can appreciate and he feels the tightness around his lungs and throat lessen slightly.

Stanley is the right choice. He'll make his friend understand. He will. He has to.

...

They arrive at the cabin like they always do and are greeted simply by El leaning against the open doorframe. The girl stays wordless and is seemingly paler than she had been the day before, if that was even possible. She gives Eddie the heebie jeebies and he finds himself reaching for Stanley's wrist and squeezing it fiercely, pulling at his friend to stop before they even get near the front door. His friend gives a little jerk of surprise at being stopped in such a manner and Mike catches the movement, giving both of them a little look.

"Everything ok?" He asks. Eddie gives the question a shrug as an initial answer.

"I just..." He starts and then pushes himself to continue. There's no way he could have gotten away with having a conversation unnoticed. Might as well just move past this. "... wanted to talk to Stanley about something." He sees from the corner of his eyes more of the group pause to look at them and feels his cheeks start to heat up.

"...okay..." Mike responds, tone calm and gentle as always. "We'll be inside if you need us." It's the same tone but it's final in some way and leads everyone to continue moving inside the house

with no space to question or argue. Eddie will have to thank Mike later if he remembers.

He waits until the door closes before letting Stanley's wrist go loose from the hold and then it's like a dam that's breaking as a torrent of hissed words start spilling out of his mouth.

Max is running late this morning and her sides hurt at how quickly she's running through the forest. She should have taken Lucas up on his offer to pick her up. She knows she should have. But she hasn't really liked the look in Billy's eyes the last time Lucas had come to pick her up. Yeah, he's left them alone for the most part since she'd threatened him but... she knows how quickly memories fade or lose their bite. And Billy, well, she hadn't wanted to test the situation. The last thing they need on top of Mike and Richie being missing is her stepbrother attacking Lucas just because he *could*.

She also hadn't wanted Lucas to be delayed in continuing the search. She knew that it would be faster for him to just go straight to the lab versus having to pick her up and drop her back at the cabin before heading to the lab. And they really didn't have time to waste. The search was already taking so much longer than they'd initially anticipated.

She stumbles to a halt as she hears voices talking rapidly outside of the cabin. That was strange to put it mildly. They always take such care to not be seen, to not be heard or noticed that they rarely ever stay outside of the cabin... who in the world...? It makes a bit more sense when she realizes that it's two of the Losers.

"Eddie," Stanley tries to say but is cut off.

"No, don't tell me to calm down! I'm serious Stanley! We're wasting time just sitting there and waiting while the others search that abandoned lab. We could be doing something else in the mean time... like what about searching Richie's room? Or other areas that he used to hang out at...We could do that! We know him better than they do. Maybe he's left us a sign or a clue that they wouldn't even know to make sense of..." The smaller of the two boys is talking so rapidly that Max can only barely understand all that he's saying. His friend looks like he's trying to get a word in edgewise, waiting for

Eddie to take a breath. “Please don’t make me go in there and just wait again. Please... I can’t... I won’t. I’ll do it alone if I have to but I can’t go back in there. Have you seen her? There’s something wrong with her... nosebleeds and so pale and rarely ever saying a fucking word. What if she’s sick? What if it’s contagious? I can’t breathe in there...I can’t breathe!”

The flow of words goes from rapid to panicky and high pitched. Stanley’s eyes go wide before he snaps into motion, hands moving towards his friend’s stomach and very rapidly unzipping and getting something from his fanny pack.

“Jesus Eddie,” Stanley mutters, pulling the inhaler and bringing it to Eddie’s mouth. “It’s going to be okay...Just fucking breath, okay? Please?”

The smaller of the two doesn’t answer, just holding onto his inhaler and his friend’s hands who are also still holding onto the inhaler as well like they’re a life line. And Max can’t help but notice the tear tracks that are making their way down his cheeks.

She feels stuck where she is. An unintentional witness to the scene and definitely eavesdropping whether she wants to or not. Max internally curses and thinks about her possible options before shaking her head. She steps forward and clears her throat making both of them jump.

“Shit!” She hears one of them yelp but at the moment, she can’t really identify who and really, it doesn’t matter that much. Max gives them what she hopes is an apologetic expression.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to... I was running late.” She motions behind her as if that would explain why she was running late before dropping her hand beside her helplessly. It really doesn’t explain shit and she knows it. “El’s not sick you know.” She starts quietly, averting her eyes from Eddie’s reddening face as he wipes away at his cheeks. “But I get that it’s hard to be in there, just waiting.” Max offers, hands going to rest into her pockets. “I think... I think we do know Richie pretty well but... I’d rather be sure we did *everything* and not miss anything, you know? So if it helps, I can bring you to the Wheeler household and you can search their room too. Just...” She

hesitates, looking at the cabin's closed door. "Just let me tell the others."

...

It's strange seeing the Wheeler house again, Eddie thinks. He can't help but compare it to Richie's home back in Derry. He can't help but try and guess at which window is Richie's room and see if there's anyway that his lanky friend would climb to and from that just like he did in Derry. As if he'd had an allergy to using the front door. But there's nothing outwardly indicating Richie's room and so Eddie's eyes drop to the welcome mat as he lets Max ring the doorbell. Stanley stays close, quiet. He's barely spoken really since Max had caught them and offered to go with them. He hadn't really said much even before then. But Eddie knows that this is partly due to Eddie not providing him an opening to do so.

It doesn't take long for the door to open and reveal a woman that Eddie knows intellectually has got to be Richie's aunt. Nancy looks like her. She's pale, dark circles under her eyes that are only somewhat concealed by an excellent make up job. There's a young child next to her who stays mute.

"Hi Mrs. Wheeler," Max starts and Eddie tunes her out as the redhead goes about introducing them. He goes on complete automatic as Mrs. Wheeler welcomes them in and hugs him and Stanley hard. He can feel her grief and fear in the simple greeting and it's a bit too much for him.

Maybe the dusty cabin was the better choice after all.

Richie's absence is just as present here as it was there.

But at least he didn't have to deal with an adult's hopelessness straight on. He would have simply been surrounded by his friends' continued blind hope and frenetic energy to persevere.

He follows Max, a buzzing in his ear keeping him from hearing and comprehending any of the words that are being exchanged around him. Stanley isn't coming with them though and for a moment, it makes him pause. But Stanley's eyes catch his and

he can see the message clear as day. Keep going. I'll be here. So he turns away from Stanley, and does exactly that.

...

There's a part of Stanley that wishes that he could have left Eddie in Max's capable hands. There's something about the redhead and her no-nonsense, cut the bullshit crap that he admires. He knows with some certainty that she would have been able to handle Eddie's meltdown if he were to have one again with enough kindness but also enough... pragmatism? Was that the word? Either way, she would have been able to handle Eddie. Maybe even better than he can. He shakes his head, hand pushing a stray curl away from his eyes.

He wishes he could have left Eddie to her and stayed in the cabin, surrounded by the static of the supercomm and updates that were no updates at all. The cabin had been filled with tension yes, the kind that made it hard to breathe but at least, it had been hopeful.

The Wheeler household is anything but. His heart *aches* as he follows Mrs. Wheeler into the kitchen. He's experienced this atmosphere before in Bill's home, right after Georgie's disappearance. He remembers like it was yesterday the way Bill's mom had continued holding onto hope in such a desperate way while Bill's dad became angrier and angrier, hope dwindling to nothing. It's a suffocating atmosphere. A heavy one. And he can see its impact on those petite shoulders, the brittle polite smile, and the way Mrs. Wheeler's eyes keep going back to the silent phone on the wall while she still tries to act like she has everything under control.

He can also see it in the way the little girl keeps a hold of her mother's hand, eyes wide and bleak. As if they've suddenly aged by years due to having to face the world's inherent darkness.

He can't leave them alone in the silent kitchen.

Stanley gently takes the coffee pot from the woman's trembling hands and takes over pouring two mugs full of the dark bitter liquid. He moves as if he's known this kitchen and is

comfortable in it, guessing at where everything is. He goes and finds milk and pours the little girl a mug of it since she's too young to have coffee. And as he does so, he finds himself talking in gentle tones on automatic, kneeling on the ground so that he's eye to eye with the little girl instead of looking down on her.

Georgie had been older when he'd disappeared. But Stanley can't get him out of his head and can't help but see something of Georgie in the little girl in front of him. He can't help but wonder what Richie's reaction would have been at meeting her for the first time and realizing that he would have a younger "sibling" again. Because yes Georgie had been Bill's little brother by blood, but he'd been the Loser's baby brother in spirit.

He doesn't really know what he's saying to mother and daughter. Just knows vaguely that he's sharing stories of Richie, how they met, and how he's Stanley's best friend. He's stringing words into sentences in order to share about the different antics that Richie's always pulled and somehow survived in hopes that somehow, despite it being painful, it brings some comfort too.

It's hours later that Stanley, Eddie and Max make their way out of the Wheeler household and towards the Byers' home. Stanley's throat is dry and hurting but he still manages to force the next words out with a vehemence that makes Eddie jump and not question them and Max's eyes widen in confusion.

"Don't mention Holly to Bill. It'll kill him." Especially if they fail at finding Richie and Mike and healing the family from the current ordeal. But that goes unsaid.

...

Somewhere else, miles away and ignorant of what the Party, the Losers, and Kali's gang are doing, Mike is for once the one laying down with his head in his brother's lap. His head is pounding and it's only been a handful of minutes since they've been able to stop his latest nosebleed. He feels a bit faint and he can't quite concentrate on the dirty jokes that Richie keeps filling the air with. But there's comfort in hearing his twin's voice that sounds more lucid than it has in days.

If only his head could stop hurting.

He closes his eyes and takes a breath in. Holds it. And then slowly releases it before repeating the process again.

And all the while Richie keeps talking. He's simply sitting there, holding the majority of his weight on his hands that are placed on the firm mattress just a little behind him. One leg swings a little under Mike's cheek— a nervous sort of move that is a bit uncomfortable. It makes it hard to fully relax and surrender to the darkness that sleep would bring.

Not that he's sure he could sleep with the pain.

But he wishes he could.

Tbc...

A/N – Hi everyone! I wanted to take a moment to say thank you, thank you for all the continued support, likes, and comments. I love reading everyone's comments and messages. I love hearing about your guesses to the twin's powers or how the story will get resolved (i.e., will the Party and the Losers help the twins escape or will the twins escape on their own) – they're all fantastic and some of you have gotten such close guesses!!! I also wanted to share a brief personal update. I know at the last chapter update, I'd shared that things had been hectic but I was hopeful that things would be calming down. Unfortunately, things have not calmed down so much. I've started physical therapy for chronic back pain and currently, the treatment's made the pain worse to the point where it's hard to be sitting for any long amount of time and makes it hard to concentrate/stay focused. As you can imagine, it's been hard for me to write. It's even been hard to daydream at times which is incredibly infuriating as daydreaming and writing are two of the ways that I practice self-

care... In any case, I wanted to share that my goal is still to try and update the story at least 1x a week but if it takes a bit longer between updates, I hope that you can all understand and be patient with me. Sending you all much love and if you are traveling for Thanksgiving Break, safe travels.

10. Chapter 10

Summary for the Chapter:

The Losers are realizing that a week is simply not enough time for them to get Richie back and it makes everyone reconsider the original plan for the Search. In the mean time, the tests up their ante for both Richie and Mike...

Chapter 10

Day 17 & 18

When Bill had come up with the plan to go to Hawkins and search for Richie, he'd been sure of one thing – that they would find *something* to help bring the twins home– even if it wasn't Richie himself right away. He'd had a deep unshakeable faith that they would help the search and move it forward and that in the end, it would bring Richie home.

Bill hasn't slept well since forever and he's not sleeping now, silently sitting and thinking alone. He's forgotten what it's like to experience uninterrupted sleep. To not have nightmares that cause his chest to hurt and to want all the lights turned on to chase the darkness away and ensure that there are no glowing eyes watching over him, just waiting to taunt him with his failures and talk him into giving up. (*But even shadows are dangerous and lights cast those and so there's never any sense of security. The glowing eyes could be found in shadows too after all.*) He's always been able to find the light, to find the hope, and to not give in to despair regardless of the growing darkness in this world.

But right now he feels defeated and he knows everyone around him does too. He'd seen it in their faces just before they turned in for bed. He'd heard it in the silence and the lack of words shared. No updates from the failed mission. No acknowledgments. Simply avoided eye contact and curved backs. Failure is heavy.

Defeat even more so.

He knows he should be saying *something*. Something that would rally all of them into holding onto hope. And that he needs to find those words *now* while everyone sleeps because morning is coming far too quickly and soon everyone will wake and decisions will have to be made. So Bill stays sitting and thinking. Alone.

Yes, their searches in the building have led them to finding *nothing*. And yes, there were still no ransom calls and no other leads that had turned up but...but... but...

Fucking *nothing*. That was the problem. How can he come up with words to build up hope when there's *nothing*?

Bill's throat spasms at trying to take a simple breathe in. He can't see himself trying to form even one word that would be understood in the state that he's in. Maybe defeated isn't strong enough of a word for him right now.

Maybe he just feels outright despair.

He can't believe they've come all this way and done all this work and still be empty handed. He can't believe that he may indeed have to break his promise to Richie. The faded image of that wrinkled missing poster floats in his mind and he shudders.

He can't.

He just can't!

And yet he doesn't know what else to do.

The bus ticket back to Derry burns in his pocket. He knows there's only hours left before they're supposed to board and it hurts more than he's able to acknowledge.

It was never supposed to be this way.

They were always supposed to bring him home.

They were never supposed to fail.

Just like they were never supposed to forget one another...

...

Mike's head hurts more often than not these days. He also feels lightheaded and cold and his nose is usually stuffed up with dried blood, fresh blood filling in the empty spaces during every test that they're put through. There's never enough tissues or sleeves to ever feel like he can wipe and clear out the tender passageways and he's learned to get used to the chronic dry mouth that comes from breathing through your mouth. It's unpleasant but everything is right now.

In moments where he's left alone, he's had vague wonders of whether it's like this for El when she uses her powers. These thoughts quickly are followed by him berating himself and everyone in the Party for ever having thought it was cool, for asking her to show off... because if it is like this for her... God, he just hopes it isn't.

And who the fuck knows, maybe it isn't. Maybe the fact that she was born with her ESP versus having the potential prodded to life with a cocktail of drugs makes it less painful to use. But whenever he tries to convince himself of this, his mind is quick to remind him that she still gets the nosebleeds and he knows for a fact that using her powers still leaves her exhausted and drained. The thoughts whirl in and out and leave him feeling shitty in a different way.

There's really only peace in sleep or after the injections. But his injections are slowing down. The dose they hit Richie with is only increasing and it scares the *fuck* out of Mike. At least right this hour, there won't be any injections. After all, they're trying something new today.

Mike wants to stay curled up where he is but Brian is poking him into sitting up. Richie has already been taken away into another room. Mike can only assume that they've apparently graduated to the next "level" where their ability to communicate with one another is being tested by how far apart they can be and still "hear" each other. Fucking yay. Still, it's better than Richie getting an injection and having to be the silent and possibly sober witness.

He's not sure they're ready for the upgrade. He knows for sure that Dr. Brenner isn't happy with them. Not happy with their level of progress. Not that the man has said much the last few times he's been in to see them. But it's clear in the tension that lines the man's face and the darkness that fills his eyes and just... Mike just knows.

Dr. Brenner had been disappointed that so far only Telepathy seemed to be cropping up and only with Mike. He could act as the Sender or the Receiver and the electrodes measuring his brain wave activity would go beserk along with the blood dripping from his nose... along with Brian excitedly writing down God knows what sort of observation he thought was relevant in the moment. (*The man really was useless. Mike still couldn't understand his role aside of being a glorified babysitter. There were tons of audio and video recording machines that lined every space they'd ever been taken to that had to be so much more valuable and accurate in recording every second and the illegible scrawl that lines the often crumpled pieces of paper still barely attached to a much abused clipboard*). Richie's brain wave activity stayed normal. And both Mike and Richie have so far failed the few initial tests that he supposes were measuring for Telekinesis and whatever the rest of the categories were.

And so they were back to merely focusing on the Telepathy. For now...

Mike barely listens to Brian as the man starts to explain what they'll be doing today, noting simply that he does not have the Zener cards splayed out before him on the table. Nor does he have a sheet with a list of words to look at.

Richie must be playing the part of the Sender and Mike will be the Receiver. He knows the drill. He knows that when Richie is the Sender, he needs to search for him. It was harder in some ways but he'd figured the trick out a couple days ago (*weeks or maybe simply hours ago? The lack of clocks and daylight still bug the hell out of him and leave him confused as to the actual passage of times. He just guesses or arbitrarily chooses the time that makes the most sense to him. It's the only thing he can do.*). He needed to 'find' Richie in the Void and then he could hear and feel whatever it was Richie was trying to communicate to him. He'd never thought he could go into the Void

on his own... part of him aches to test if he can go and find El there but so far, he's barely able to go in on his own and stay there long enough to get a sense of what's going on for Richie before being in too much pain that he loses his hold on the Void altogether.

Mike isn't sure whether he's supposed to feel his twin's emotions as well as hear the thoughts or whatever images they've asked Richie to visualize when he plays the role of the Receiver but he hasn't felt like sharing this additional information with Dr. Brenner and his minion. And he hasn't even shared it with Richie yet. It feels like an additional violation in some ways and half the time, he just wants to forget what he's heard, seen, and felt (*Like their mother's eyes. Her lips. Her expression. So haunting. He never wants to hear what she'll say. He never wants to have Richie hear it*). But when he's being honest with himself, it's Richie's emotions that make it too painful for him to keep a hold of the Void. It's too overwhelming. So he just tries to focus merely on the specific information that's part of the study.

Brian makes a little grunt at the back of his throat and Mike nods as if to say he's been listening and then goes to close his eyes. Automatically he braces himself as if it'll help as he starts to focus for his brother. The inky darkness of the Void swallows him up and for a heartbeat or two, he is alone and the silence around him is deafening. The white room and Brian feel very far away when he's here.

It's always been strange to feel like he's standing in water that he cannot feel and that he cannot hear moving around his feet when he walks forward. He stares at the darkness for a moment before forming his brother's name.

His brother's lanky shape starts to form slowly before him. But it's wrong. It is all very and horribly wrong. Because Richie is not crouched above cards or a sheet full of words that he's repeating to himself over and over again. He's not even at a table in one of those white box-like rooms.

Instead Richie is strapped to a hospital bed and his back is arched in an arc that looks and feels painful, spine cracking as his wrists and ankles strain to free themselves from the leather binding him still. His twin brother's mind is yelling incoherently and before Mike can take a step back to let go of the Void before it all hits him,

he's sucked into the shocking pain that is Richie and Mike simply no longer is.

...

Red.

Floating bad.
would be easier)

(*But it*

Drip, dripping, dripping always dripping.

Floating too.
Floating in me).

(*You would have had peace by now. Devoured.*

Mom... mommy dearest....

Hurts.
ease it for you...)

(*Let me*

It hurts to drip.

Hurts to float.
and easy and peaceful)

(*No, it's so light*

It burns.

Everything burns.
(Just another step forward)

(Just another nudge... just

Everything...

...speak to me.

Save me.

Red.

Orange.
Golden.

Black.

you.)

See
me.
(I see

Please!

(I have always seen you).

Mikey...

(Playing hide and seek.)

I don't want to...

(... but you do. You have
always loved to play)

Red. Drip. Red. Drip. Red.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Black. Brown. Orange.

Floating, floating, float...

I'm drowning.

I'm burning.

I'm dying.

Please let me die. Dead, dead, dead, dying, dying, dying dead. Just die already. Just die. DIE!

(not yet... not when we've just started playing again you and I)

NO!
NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO!

NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO!
NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO!

(Not when you haven't fully started to float...)

Floaty

float

float...

...

“What in all *hells* happened?” It’s less a question and more of a command. The scene is being played on the two screens before them after all. One shows Twelve and the other shows Thirteen and the video feeds play simultaneously what had been filmed just barely over an hour ago.

The noise on both screens has been muted and Brian is glad of it. He’s not sure he’s stopped shaking yet and his ears still feel like they’re vibrating with the echoes of Twelve’s screams. And he’s been told by the attendant at Thirteen’s side that his screams had been worse. Brian hides a shiver and forces himself to answer the command.

“I don’t know sir. We were following the protocol you set out for today. At eighteen hundred hours, Twelve had been told to listen for you while Thirteen was taken to get the upped dosage...” He trails off but feels some pride at hearing his voice sounding calm, cool, and collected. Professional and detached. “By eighteen hundred

ten, Twelve started to scream and then passed out and I called you sir.”

There is a stretch of silence that feels colder and unimpressed at the summary. But Brian cannot change the facts of the situation and he has nothing else he can add to help understand the situation further.

...

The Losers stand awkwardly at the bus station as one group, shoulders all touching. Kali watches over them and she can *feel* Funshine staring at her to say *something*. What exactly he thinks she can do by saying some bullshit words is beyond her. She's never been the coddling kind. And only one person has ever even pulled her to feel like she could coddle or take care of another being in such a way. And that person was *not* standing in front of her.

Still, she finds herself clearing her throat.

“So, I know it’s already been said but...” The group turns to face her, eyes still slightly lowered and doesn’t that make them look like a pathetic bunch of kicked puppies. Tug at her heartstrings, won’t they. Fuckers. “The search isn’t over.” The words are said more forcefully. “I have a couple leads on scientists who used to work at the lab who still need to be brought to *justice*. We’ll make sure they talk before they receive their final judgment.”

One of the taller ones shifts at the announcement. She can tell by the look in his eyes that he wants to ask what sort of justice it’ll be but then thinks better of it.

“And y-y-you’ll k-keep us updated?”

She shrugs at the safer question being asked of her instead, glancing behind her to see Funshine relaxing against the rusty side door of the van.

“If not me, I’m sure someone in Jane’s lovely little ‘Party’ will...” The teen glances at his friends as if to see if they’re okay with this. As if they have a choice. She is *not* going to get sucked into

babysitting and holding these kids' hands. She'll do the part of the hunting because it lines up with her own mission.

She won't add more to that mission beyond trying to rescue the damned twins.

And keep in touch with Jane.

Nothing less. Nothing more.

Finally, all of them slowly nod and she turns away from them, motioning to Funshine to get his fucking big ass into the van without a word. She can't stand stupid goodbyes. They're a fucking waste of time and they really don't have more time to waste.

She has the picture of the next man she's targeting with information from Jane on where to find him.

This is what they should have been doing all along and *not* breaking into a dead end shut down lab that had given her the creeps in that it had somewhat felt like she'd finally *come home*.

"...Y-y-you call us. If-f-f you need us. W-w-we'll come. W-w-we'll con-continue to search for them t-t-too. We'll never stop."

She holds up a hand in acknowledgement but doesn't turn around. She's seen enough of suburbia and teenagers to last her a lifetime.

Tbc...

A/N - I hope everyone had an enjoyable Turkey (or Tofurkey day) this week and had safe travels if you traveled!!! Also, hoping that everyone who's in the path of the major storm stays warm and dry and safe!!! Thank you all for the support and understanding you've provided me. It's truly priceless. Sending you all tons of love.

Also, about the story and the turn of events, I hope you all forgive me

for not providing that quick and successful reunion I know many of you were hoping would come from the Loser's Club joining the Party in the search for the twins. We're just not quite there yet... <3

11. Chapter 11

Summary for the Chapter:

The days keep passing, meaning people are struggling and grasping at straws or outright losing their tempers...

Chapter 11

Day 35

Hopper doesn't like it. He doesn't like it one bit and he feels like every moment is another minute ticking closer to when everything is going to explode in his face. If it hasn't already. Dr. Owens is simply another dead end. The man is clueless about who is behind the twins' disappearance. His current advice simply echoes his past one.

Keep her hidden. Keep her quiet. Keep her safe.

And that is all that Hopper wants to do. More than ever before. It's too risky his heart and head yells at him. The fact that Dr. Owens agrees with him had even been soothing until he'd come back home to their cabin in the woods and had found her passed out on the ground; face a bloody mess once again.

This couldn't keep happening. She couldn't keep draining herself day in and day out trying to find the Wheeler kid and his brother. She was going to kill herself. And he was grasping at straws to solve a mystery kidnapping with no *fucking* clues besides too many dead bodies available to him. He couldn't lose her too in the process.

And it's not like he could watch her 24/7 and forcibly keep her from going into the Void. Not and still work the case. His mind had worked feverishly to try and find another option. Joyce worked, the kids were only a temporary option with school starting in a handful of weeks and who knows if they'd actually help keep her out

of the Void and not egg her into searching and using her powers in different ways.

No... this couldn't continue.

Hopper picks her up and frowns at how light he finds her to be. She must have lost weight again. He sighs and decides that he's going to make his triple-decker Eggo waffle extravaganza special and make sure that he tops it with calories galore. He may die early of diabetes and a heart attack but damn it, he was going to make sure that she stopped losing weight in the process!

Carefully, he places her in her bed and tucks her in.

"What the hell are we going to do, kid?" He whispers, hand briefly covering his eyes before it drops back to his side listless.

...

When El wakes up, she feels ill. She's feverish and her whole body aches. She knows immediately that she's over done it once again and that she'll most likely be chewed out *again* for going back to the Void. But she can't help it. She keeps hoping that each trip there will turn out differently. That Mike will finally be there and he'll be able to give her a clue as to where he is and how he's doing but today, the Void had been just like all the other times. Eerily empty. She wants to cry and hides her face into her pillow briefly so that any tears can be absorbed and hidden away as quickly as they come.

There's muffled sounds just outside her bedroom indicating that Hopper is home. There's no music though – just clangs and clangs leading her to assume that he's either cooking or cleaning. And that he has no updates to give her. If there had been, he would have woken her up. He would have let her know immediately.

Even Kali had been silent and without updates. She'd found one man and sent a photo of another person to find but since that call, nothing. The Party and the Losers are also at a standstill and it becomes painful to meet up together or call one another. Still, Will is usually here with her more often than not. Just not today. She can't

even remember why now.

El stays motionless, listening to the sounds. She doesn't move even when there's the softest of knocks on her door. She knows that he'll poke his head in and at seeing her awake, he'll most likely come in and try and urge her to eat. He'll try and make her smile, try to instill some hope while also finding a way to remind her that she can't keep doing what she's doing.

She knows... and it's making her want to scream. She doesn't want to see his weathered face, the increasing grays and whites in his brown hair, the worry in his eyes all because of her and the continued trauma she continues to put all of them through.

If she'd never made contact, if she'd never created the gate, if she'd never run away...

If she'd never found Mike and attached herself to him...

If, if, if...

El can feel the sob build in her chest and up her throat. It hurts. Worse than any injury she's ever experienced.

Mike, I need you. Please come home... please, please...

It's day 35, 1 month and 5 days, 850 some hours and El can't breathe. It's so much worse being the one calling out blindly with the not knowing and having to grapple with the fear and the hope combined. She doesn't know how Mike managed for the 355 days that he did.

But he had.

And it's that little thought that leads her to push herself up and swing her feet off the mattress and back onto the ground.

He'd held out and had kept calling for her, searching for her...

So she would too.

El knows that she surprises Hopper when she opens the door to her room. The man has clearly been pacing back and forth between the kitchen and her room after not following through with his soft knocking.

“El...” He starts softly. “How you doing kid?” The question is gruff but his hand remains warm and gentle as it comes down to ruffle her hair. She doesn’t know how to answer the question and so she doesn’t. But she also doesn’t move away from the touch. She simply stares up at the man, this big solid man that had made her feel safe in a way she’d thought she’d never feel with an adult.

She wishes that feeling of safety had continued.

“Yeah...” Hopper clears his throat as if she had said something. “I hear you.” He sighs then, his hand sliding to cup the back of her head briefly before giving her a slight nudge. “I wish I had news, kid. I really do. Just know that I’m not giving up on them, okay? I will *never* give up on them.”

Her eyes tear up at the strength behind the words and she nods helplessly. She doesn’t even have to ask the question out loud. It must be on her face because he nods in turn and whispers, “...that’s a fucking promise kiddo.”

...

“What haven’t we thought of yet?” Dustin asks, pencil in his mouth muffling his words. The pencil flies out of his mouth just as he finishes his question to tap impatiently at the paper that’s in front of them. It’s lined with various coded words and some have been scratched out as eventual dead ends. It looks a mess because it is a mess.

Lucas shares a little look with Max that speaks volumes about how he feels about the question. Unlike her boyfriend, she can’t keep her irritation quiet.

“How the hell should we know if we haven’t thought of it yet?” She snaps as she throws her hair back into a ponytail and out of her face.

“Not helpful Maxine.” Dustin responds with a dry tone and then yelps as her fist makes contact with his arm. Hard.

“You call me that again and...” Will takes her hand in his while giving Dustin a look. It’s *the* look. The one that says that even their calm, peaceful cleric is this close to losing his patience. It’s been coming more frequent as of late.

“Alright, alright! But I’m *trying* to come up with another line of investigation here and none of you are being helpful!” Dustin erupts, throwing his hat and pencil across the room. “What the fuck are we going to do? Their doctors were a *literal* dead end. Went Tozier is *fucking* missing and no one has any idea where the man could have gone. Hawkins lab was just a fucking dusty maze that gave us a good work out...” Dustin ignores Lucas’ whispered grumble that the only work out Dustin got out of that episode was a verbal one. “Kali’s idea of regular updates is laughable and there’s nothing remotely helpful to gain from Derry. El’s literally wasting to nothing in front of our eyes and is getting *nothing*... and I mean *nothing* out of the Void. And school fucking starts back up in what...? Less than a month?” He pauses and glares at the rest of the Party members. “Am I fucking missing anything?”

At first there’s silence to greet his question. It gives him time enough to reign his temper and feel bad. Hopeless even. He knows it’s not fair to take it out on them. After all, they’re all on the same boat, paddling in the same nameless direction. Completely lost at sea.

This was one curiosity voyage he was desperate to have come to an end.

He’s about to apologize but Will starts to speak.

“...Factually... you have it correct.” He starts slowly. “But El and Kali haven’t lost hope. They know Hawkin’s Lab and Dr. Brenner better than anyone. We have to hold onto that.”

“But what do we do with that?” Dustin asks plaintively.

“We make sure El doesn’t forget it. We keep her strength and her hope up. And if new information comes to us...” Will trails off

but Max continues for him, voice strong.

“...then we act and kick some ass.”

A/N - I'm back! I think, I hope, (crosses fingers). Thank you everyone for all of the outpouring of support and understanding and I'm so sorry there was a delay in posting the next chappie. I'm hoping to remedy that by posting another chapter by this weekend and getting back on track. In any case, I know this chappie was lacking in the Losers and Kali but please know that they are absolutely and in no way done with this story and will be back! Sending you all lots of love and hoping this has all been a great week for everyone!